

## Good Weeds . . . Or Why You Want Dandelions in Your Yard

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May 10, 2017: Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." We realize that trying to get hard-core grass lovers to embrace weeds is a hard sell, but before you yank that dandelion, please consider the following ways that "uninvited guests" can keep your garden beautiful and your environment healthy. (And even if we don't convince you, please consider attacking an offensive weed with boiling water poured from a narrow teapot spout instead of using Roundup, which has been linked to cancer and is very toxic to all wildlife from bees to birds.)

**Clover:** It feeds bees! And you've heard that bees need all the help they can get right now, right? But you might not know that clover is so good at helping fertilize the soil that it used to be included in commercial grass mixes until a consumer preference for the "pure grass look" took hold in suburban communities.

Clover is a nitrogen fixer, which means that it pulls nitrogen from the air and converts it to substances that feed the soil, thus reducing the need to apply artificial nitrogen to the lawn (a practice that has been blamed for contaminating local streams and rivers). Also, clover attracts earthworms, which provide beneficial little tunnels of air and moisture around your plants' roots. Clover retains more moisture than it uses, acting like green mulch. And finally, rabbits love clover, so they will often nibble on it instead of on your more prized plants.

**Dandelions:** Honeybees love them as much as many humans hate them! But dandelions can really help your lawn. First, their roots give off grass-enriching minerals and nitrogen, which enter the soil. Then, as these long roots break up hard soil deep in the ground, they allow easier access for those nutrients to get to all the other plants around them. Dandelions also repel armyworm caterpillars (found in the Northeast as far north as Quebec), a pest that will devour just about everything green in its path. And finally, dandelions are great detoxers for the body. If you don't use pesticides on your lawn, you can throw the tender young leaves in a salad!

To limit dandelions from completely taking over, mow often enough to keep them from going to seed (but keep the grass long enough to help retain moisture in the soil and provide shade for grass root systems).

**Mugwort:** This plant is like an environmental cleanup crew, absorbing heavy metals that have found their way into your lawn via automobile exhaust, polluted air, road runoff, or pesticide use. Mugwort repels leaf-eating moths from your garden and replenishes soil that is lacking nutrients, and it is great to prevent erosion on steep slopes.

The benefits that these three plants provide for our soil prove that labeling a plant a "weed" is actually just a value judgment. Maybe we can start to think of a beautiful lawn as more than just grass and enjoy the variety, color, and benefit that weeds such as clover, dandelion, and mugwort provide. As A.A. Milne wrote, "Weeds are flowers, too, once you get to know them."