

Getting to Know the Common Dandelion

Common Dandelion Is An Introduced Weed

Common dandelion is an *introduced* plant in North America. In the mid-1600s, European settlers brought the common dandelion (scientific name, *Taraxacum officinale*) to eastern America and cultivated it in their gardens for food and medicine. Since then it has spread across the continent as a weed.

A *weed* is a plant that grows where it is not wanted, often colonizing the open, disturbed areas created by human activity. Gardens, fields, pastures, waysides and waste places, all provide excellent dandelion habitat.

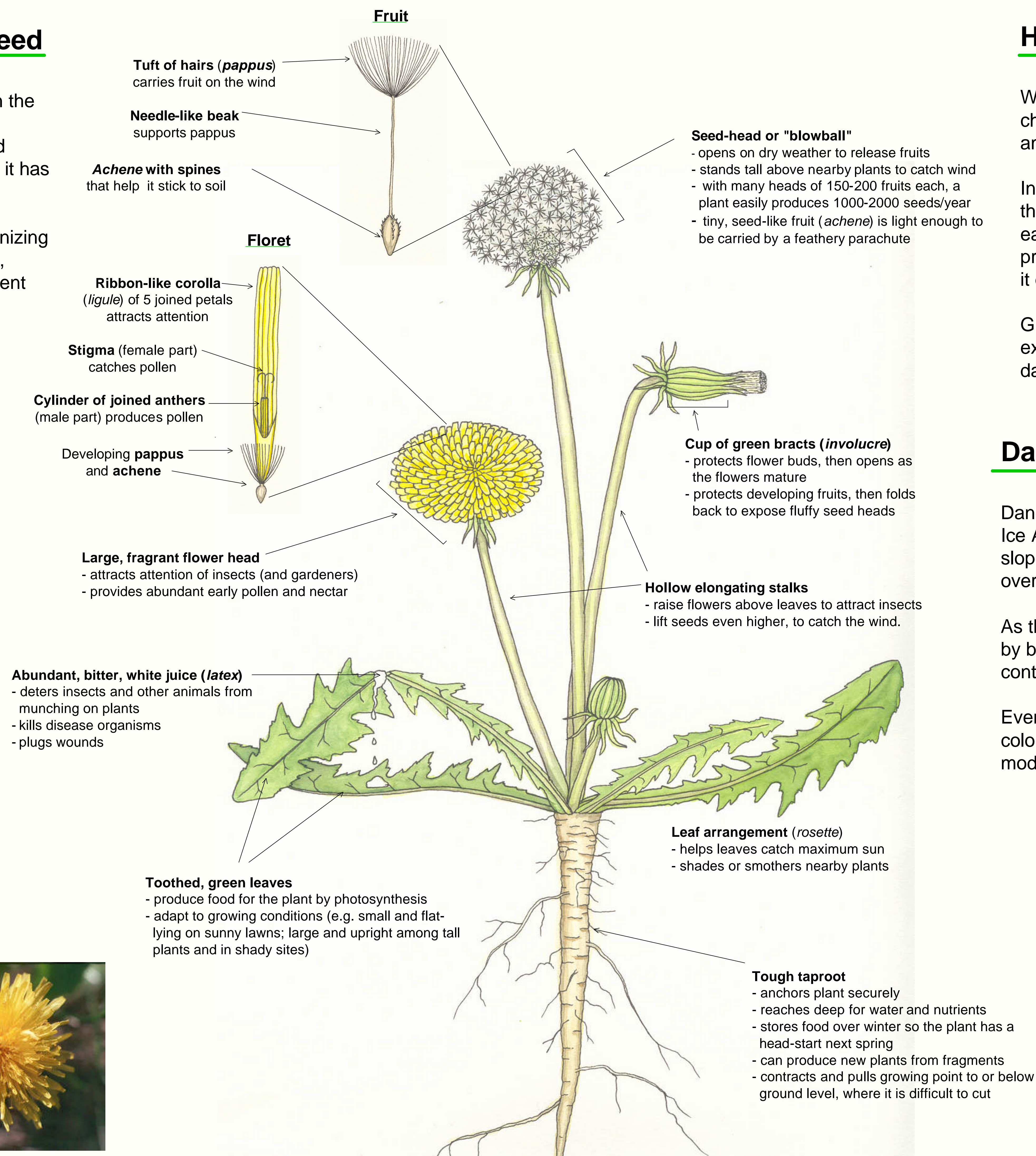
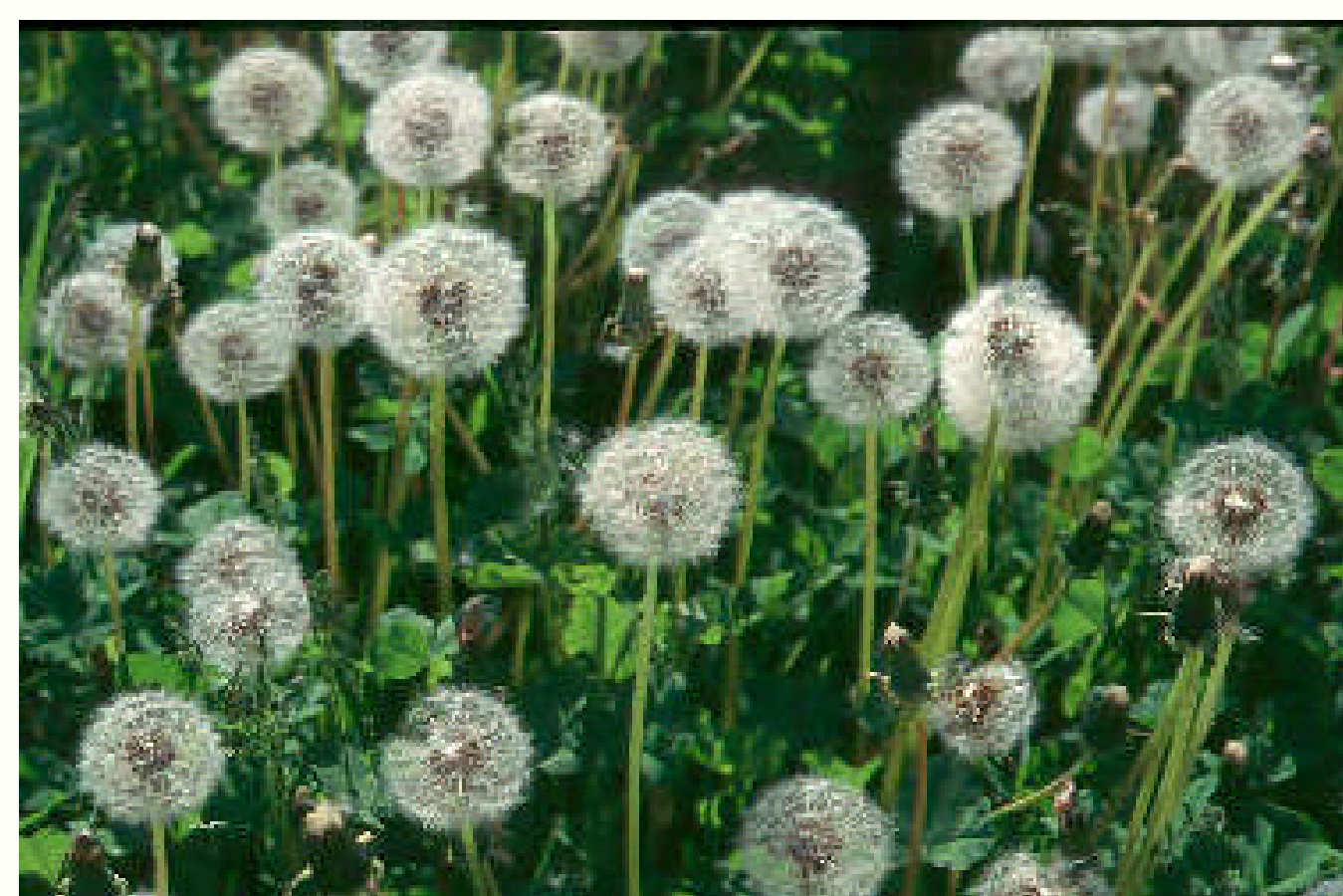
Native Dandelions

Native plants are species that occur naturally in an area. There are several native dandelions in North America, but only one of these, a small alpine species called northern dandelion (*Taraxacum ceratophorum*), grows in Alberta.

Flower Power

Dandelions belong to the Aster Family (scientific name Asteraceae or Compositae). In this family, each "flower" is really a head of tiny flowers (*florets*) crowded together for show.

Dandelion florets reflect ultraviolet light which attracts certain insects, including bees, to feed on the pollen and nectar. Many of these insects are also important pollinators of other plants, including crops.



How Dandelions Breed... You'd Never Guess!

With their colourful flowers and abundant pollen and nectar, dandelions channel a lot of energy into attracting pollinating insects. Yet amazingly, dandelions do not need to be pollinated to set seed.

Instead the female parts of the flowers develop seeds on their own, through a process called *apomixis*. Because of this, the offspring of each plant are genetically identical to their parent. If each new plant produces 1000 offspring and each of these produces 1000 and so on, it doesn't take long to generate 1,000,000s of identical plants.

Groups of genetically identical organisms are called *clones*. With excellent seed dispersal and clones of well-adapted plants, common dandelion has colonized disturbed habitats throughout the world.

Dandelions & Humans: Travelling Companions

Dandelions originated in temperate and subarctic Eurasia before the last Ice Age. They were adapted to disturbed habitats on shores, mountain slopes and steppes, so after the Ice Age their populations spread rapidly over the vast exposed landscapes left by retreating glaciers.

As the human population grew, people created similar disturbed habitats by burning and clearing for hunting and agriculture, and dandelions continued to spread. Soon humans started to use dandelions.

Eventually, both Eurasians (human and dandelion!) moved on to colonize other temperate regions. Today, both species thrive in man-modified habitats around the world.

Dandelions & Humans: Living Together

Because of their love affair with human habitats, dandelions are clearly here to stay. So how can we learn to live happily with this biological superstar? Herbicides may temporarily reduce dandelion numbers, but they can also poison people and other creatures and pollute water - a huge environmental cost. Instead, let's reduce dandelion habitat by maintaining healthy lawns and using alternative landscaping. If we learn to "dig" our dandelions, we should be able to enjoy the few that remain.