

My Yard – May The Dandelion Dilemma

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*“If dandelions were hard to grow, they
would be most welcome on any lawn.”
Andrew Mason*

In terms of popularity, dandelions may be the least appreciated flowers for all ages, except maybe toddlers who love the reachable flowers they’re allowed to freely pick and the seeds that react to even the slightest puff.

But consider their resume: “Pretty yellow flowers, no planting required, easy to grow, reliably green, adaptable to tough conditions and great in salads.” Dandelions aren’t the only spring flowers we try to get rid of. Violets, henbit, clover, mallow, pennycress and ground ivy are all considered “lawn weeds” that upset our sense of order and control and break up the perfect swaths of turfgrass we work hard to establish.

Unfortunately, attempts at elimination usually extend far beyond them. Trees, shrubs and other landscape plants are regularly damaged by unintended drift from broadleaf herbicides. Damage includes twisting and distortion of foliage, yellowing and in some cases branch dieback. The long-range implications aren’t fully known but it does cause stress on woody plants at a time of important growth.

Timing is part of the issue. Spraying for dandelions and other unwanted plants typically occurs when many of our trees and shrubs are just starting to leaf out, and their tender young foliage is especially susceptible to herbicides. The worst damage seems to occur on oaks and redbuds, but other species like ginkgo, viburnum and dogwood are also susceptible.

One solution is to simply ignore spring lawn weeds since they are primarily a cosmetic issue and most are more beneficial than harmful. With our growing recognition of the importance of pollinators—and of their rapid decline—dandelions and all the weeds mentioned above are being recognized as important nectaring plants for early season pollinators, providing nectar long before most planted ornamentals have begun to bloom.

For those who still want a weed-free lawn, the best time of year to spray herbicides is in the fall when perennial weeds are pushing energy and nutrients into their roots and thus are more effectively killed. Fall is also when most trees and shrubs are going dormant and are much less susceptible to herbicide damage. So fall control is a win-win—better weed control and less harm to non-target plants. Outside of that, the best control for dandelions may be at the dinner table: “if you can’t beat ‘em, eat ‘em.”



**Redbud, Kentucky coffeetree and tuliptree
damage from herbicide drift.**

