

A DANDELION MANIFESTO

To save the earth, we should all start thinking like gardeners

BY JOHN HERSHEY

A few years ago, I was out working in the front yard when the van of some lawn care service pulled up. I forget which one, but I remember the name of the company contained word fragments that struck me as unnatural and vaguely menacing. TurfChem or SynthGrass or something. I felt uneasy right away, but the friendly man shook my hand and offered me a free consultation.

After a quick inspection, he looked at me with the grave concern you might expect from a doctor giving you the results of your prostate exam and informed me in hushed tones that, in addition to the obvious dandelions, I unfortunately had a “clover infestation” in my lawn.

I was new to home ownership at the time, and I felt insecure about my imperfect yard. In the suburban neighborhood where I grew up, a man's value as a human being was judged by the uniform greenness of his lawn. Perhaps because my dad had rebelled against this oppressive aesthetic, I was instinctively creeped out by the menu of chemical solutions to my problems, so I didn't sign up for the services of PetroYard or whatever. But for a while after that I dug the dandelions out by the root and pulled up the clover plants as they sprawled across the lawn, trying without much success to grow socially acceptable grass.

Then I started gardening.

As I read about growing beans and peas, I learned of legumes and their amazing ability to fix nitrogen in the soil. Clover didn't look like a weed anymore. It improves the soil, provides good forage for pollinators, and might even give you a four-leafed lucky charm. Its presence in a yard seems entirely beneficial to me now.

I wish I could respond to that guy from HateWeed with this new knowledge and confidence. If he showed up again, I would say, “Dude, having a clover infestation in your lawn is like having a tomato infestation in your garden or a beer infestation in your refrigerator. A Michael Pollan infestation on your bookshelf. A Wilco infestation on your iPod.”

“A Charizard EX infestation in your Pokemon deck,” my kids would chime in.

“You get the idea,” I'd say. “It makes the whole thing better, not worse. Relax and enjoy the diversity!”

Gardening has many benefits. You get some exercise, you enjoy the healthiest and most local food possible, and you're working outside in the fresh air instead of inside cleaning the bathroom. On a more abstract level, gardening influences the way we think about food and our place in the world, so it helps change some of the paradigms that have gotten us into so much trouble.

For example, when you garden you discover that the concept of “weed” is a social construct. No plant is inherently a weed. Except the goathead, of course, a malevolent species that viciously attacks

gardeners and bicyclists without provocation. Other plants acquired their “weed” status long ago based on a conventional wisdom that, when re-examined now, can seem silly.

A dandelion never punctured my bike tire or crept painfully into my child's sandal. Yet our society teaches us to despise this plant and seek its eradication. When a dandelion opens in the lawn, we are conditioned to panic, frantically shouting to our spouse: “Honey! There's a pretty little yellow flower out there! Quick! Dump some nasty chemicals all over the yard where the children play!”

This odd yet seemingly trivial reaction to a “weed” actually reflects a lot of what is wrong with our industrial food system: monoculture and the instinctive overuse of chemicals.

Gardening has shown me there is an alternative to the standard attitude that we must wage all-out “I love the smell of RoundUp in the morning” war on the dandelion. I discovered the new paradigm while perusing a seed company's catalog: They sell organic dandelion seeds! From the gardener's perspective, the dandelion is a not a noxious weed but a beneficial plant, a lovely flower with edible leaves so high in vitamins that it's recognized as a “superfood.” You can even make wine from it! What's not to like?

For a gardener, there's a better way: Plant some dandelions, enjoy the flowers, provide nectar and pollen for the endangered honey bees and turn their leaves into a delicious salad.

The dandelion's appeal is strongest for marginally competent gardeners like me. When you try to grow a little lettuce patch in the summer heat and work like a frantic paramedic to keep your fragile seedlings alive, it makes no sense to turn around and start killing the dozens of healthy salad plants sprouting by themselves all over your yard. To a gardener, dandelions start looking less like weeds and more like a free windfall of valuable organic food. And those attitudes lead to less chemical use, more biodiversity, healthy local food, and a better environment. The look on your neighbor's face as you make your way around the lawn tossing dandelions into the salad spinner is an extra bonus.

Now, my front yard is gradually turning into an edible landscape. I let the dandelions bloom. And I'm gradually replacing sections of sod with rows of salad greens and vegetable beds. I'm sure the guy in the PoisonLawn van would hit the gas and drive away in disgust as soon as he saw it. He probably has nothing to treat a pumpkin infestation.

John Hershey lives in Denver with his wife Lynn Marie and their sons Henry and Daniel. He writes about their wacky misadventures in gardening and local eating for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and many other publications. To read more garden-variety humor, visit his website: www.rakishwit.com.

