

The up's and down's of dandelions

by Candace Ward



Photo of dandelion.

One of the first signs of spring is the prolific bloom of bright yellow dandelions along roadsides and in our lawns. As a child, can you remember the joy of blowing dandelion seed heads into the wind? As an adult do you dread uprooting hundreds of these weeds with your root fork each spring?

Like so many things in life, there is an “up” side and a “down” side to dandelions. If you enjoy eating dandelion greens and drinking dandelion wine, the dandelion is a beneficial plant in your life. If you would rather have fireweed and Jacob’s ladder, attractive Alaska native plants, along our roadsides and in our meadows instead of dandelions, you start to see the “down” side of dandelions.

Dandelions were introduced plants from Eurasia. They spread and grow aggressively in clearings, meadows, and even in open areas of the forest. Dandelions are not the only non-native, invasive plant that is “problem” plant in Alaska.

Over the last 20 years in Alaska, the growing season in our state has lengthened and summers

have grown warmer. These conditions allow many temperate-climate, invasive plants to establish themselves here. One such plant is foxtail barley whose sharp seeds cause sores in the eyes, noses, throats, and ears of wildlife and pets. Other invasive plants include oxeye daisy, “butter and eggs,” and common tansy, originally sold as ornamentals that later escaped from our gardens into the wild. These plants are not only mildly toxic to wildlife, but they out compete native plants that wildlife need for food.

Local Kenai Peninsula residents and Alaska resource agencies are becoming increasingly concerned about non-native, invasive plants and their negative effects on native plants and wildlife. To act on this concern a local event, Dandelion Sundae, will be held at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge on Sunday, May 22, from 1 – 4 p.m.

If you bring a plastic grocery bag full of dandelions or any invasive plant to the Refuge Visitor Center, you will be rewarded with a free ice cream sundae. This event is designed to reduce invasive plants and map their locations. Participants will also have an opportunity to learn more about invasive plants from plant experts Janice Chumley of the Cooperative Extension Service and Caleb Slemmons of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information, including suggested locations to gather invasive plants, you can contact the event sponsors: Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021, Cooperative Extension Service at 262-5824, and the Kenai Watershed Forum at 260-5449.

If you are interested in learning more about Alaska’s invasive plants, stop by the Refuge Visitor Center and pick up a free pocket field guide, *Selected Invasive Plants of Alaska*. For more information on invasive plants in Alaska, check out the following websites: www.uaf.edu/coop-ext, www.cniipm.org/index.html, and www.fs.fed.us/r10/spf/fhp

Candace Ward is a park ranger in the Visitor Service Program at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She enjoys searching for Alaska’s wildflowers and native plants while hiking and canoeing throughout the Kenai Peninsula. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.