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Woman uses herbs to
treat son's Lyme C3

More than a weed, a golden treasure

Dandelions are food
for people, pollinators

BY JULIA BAYLY
BDN STAFF

FORT KENT — To paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield, dandelions get no respect.

To many, the yellow flower — one of the earliest to bloom in the spring — is considered nothing more than an unsightly weed that must be eradicated from lawns and gardens at all costs. That wasn't always the case, according to the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association.

"Only in the 20th century did humans decide that the dandelion was a weed," Anita Sanchez writes on MOFGA's website. "Before the invention of lawns, the golden blossoms and lion-toothed leaves were more likely to be praised as a bounty of food, medicine and magic [and] gardeners used to weed out the grass to make room for the dandelions."

But the humble yellow flower is starting to make a comeback, according to MOFGA, with people familiarizing themselves with the plant's medicinal and culinary characteristics. For people such as Marilyn Ouellette of Fort Kent, having ready access to dandelions is like grocery shopping in her own backyard.

"I'm out there gathering [dandelions] as soon as the sun warms things up and they start coming out," Ouellette said. "I wait all winter for this."

Ouellette, who grew up in the St. John Valley, said dandelions were a big part of many families' spring diets. And for her, they still are.

"They taste so good," she said. "The season is so short, you have to get out there and get them while you can."

Dandelion foragers such as Ouellette know to pick only the flowers' new, tender green leaves before the plant flowers.

"Once the flowers blossom, the leaves get very bitter," she said. "The younger the plant, the better it tastes."

Gathering begins once the spring sun warms the ground enough for the dandelions to start growing, according to Ouellette. At that point, she said she has about two weeks to pick a year's supply.

"I try to pick enough so we can have at least one meal a month with them all year long," she said. "They freeze quite well."

To collect her dandelion greens, Ouellette heads out armed with a knife, which she jabs into the ground at the base of the plant to cut it off at the root. She then shakes off as much dirt and detritus as possible before bringing them home and washing them again outside under the hose. The final rinse is inside. Then they're ready to cook.

"I cook them with lard," Ouellette said with a laugh. "Because everything's better with lard."
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GABOR DEGRE | BDN

Jim Buckle points out frost damage on a seedling at his farm in Unity. Buckle said they lost most of their tomato, pepper and eggplant plugs in late April.

'Farming is like a marathon'

How Mainers recovered after a spider caused a greenhouse disaster

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

On a chilly night in late April, a spider crept into the thermostat in the greenhouse at Buckle Farm in Unity and, once inside, spun a web.

That small and ordinary act caused a catastrophe for farmers Jim Buckle and Hannah Hamilton, who had spent the last few months tending the seeds and seedlings in the warm greenhouse that they would plant in their fields when the weather allowed. The spider web, snugly woven between the thermostat's electrical contacts, prevented the propane furnace from turning on and heating the greenhouse that night.

The morning after, Hamilton went in the greenhouse to check the crops. Her heart sank as she looked around and began to realize she and Buckle, her fiancé, had lost all their tomato, pepper and eggplant seedlings — thousands of dollars worth — to frost. Although it was easy enough to remove the spider and restart the furnace, the outlook for the farm seemed bleak.

"Without tomatoes, you might as well not go to farmers markets," Buckle, who sold over \$20,000 worth of tomatoes two years ago, said. "We even have a tomato CSA. We would have had a lot of explaining to do."

But instead of explaining the bad news to their customers, they took a chance and reached out to fellow farmers and growers, asking for any extra seedlings that could be spared. Buckle and Hamilton said this week that they've been overwhelmed, in the best of ways, by the answers to their pleas.

"We got a huge response," Hamilton said.

Buckle said the calls, emails and Facebook messages offering extra seedlings or just words of support came from near and far.

"Most people just don't want you to fail



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Jim Buckle (left) and his fiancée, Hannah Hamilton, talk about frost damage to their seedlings at Buckle Farm in Unity.

on your face," he said. "Farming is like a marathon that is run 10 months of the year. We all know how slim the margins are. And there's always someone that needs help."

Tim Davis, a grower at Sprague's Nursery & Garden Center on Union Street in Bangor, was one of the people who read about the farm's plight on Facebook and who reached out to help, delivering some tomato and pepper seedlings to Unity.

"I was able to give him some of my extras, which helped get him where he needed to be," Davis said. "We gave them a really good deal, just basically recouping the costs of the seeds, pots and soil. Unity is far enough away that he's not really in our market, per se. But even the small greenhouses here I've always felt that it's better to be a friend than a competitor."

That kind of kindness has meant the world to Buckle and Hamilton.

"We lost the whole crop, but guess what, all these people came through, and we're back on track," Buckle said. "I just think that there's camaraderie among farmers, especially here in Maine."

'Like a tomato graveyard'

Two weeks after the furnace failure, life has normalized at the Buckle Farm. The afternoon of May 9, while unseasonable snowflakes fell from leaden skies, inside the greenhouse it was warm and smelled richly of green, growing things. Hamilton worked deftly to separate some of the tomato plugs they had received after the disaster, repotting the tiny seedlings into larger containers.

At the farm, they grow 6 acres of vegetables and non-tree fruit and 4 acres of pears, apples and plums, which they largely haul down to Boston to sell to chefs and at market. And they know all about hard work and the feeling of being
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The ground rules of urban gardening

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — At the corner of Cumberland and Forest avenues five stories up, epic views of Back Cove and the White Mountains unfold before you on a clear day. It could be the perfect platform for cocktail parties, but from this perch, above the city bustle, champagne isn't quaffed over gossip. Conversations on the roof of 409 Cumberland focus more on mulching, fertilizer and the best time to plant peas.

"Your rosemary is doing really well," urban agriculture specialist Laura Mailander told 81-year-old Barbara Kerwin, who came up to the apartment complex's greenhouse to inspect her flourishing raised bed.

As the first community rooftop garden in Portland enters its second season, Mailander, who works for Portland nonprofit Cultivating Community, is helping residents make the most out of their 5-by-5 plots.

"This is high-altitude gardening," said Mailander, who knows that wind is a challenge up here and protecting these rooftop beds,

a benefit of this healthy-living-themed building run by Avesta, is crucial.

Cities pose unique challenges to gardeners, whether on a roof, a community plot or their backyard parcel. And as more denizens of Portland embrace the activity, some ground rules apply. On the upside, pent-up urbanites get outside and commune with the elements. If their thumbs stay green they can nourish themselves and skip the lines at the farmers market. But when you are planting in public, it's a harsher reality than country calm.

Over at the Bayside Community Garden, Portland transplant Christopher Papagni, a restaurant consultant, was tying up peas and planting marigolds on a recent spring afternoon. He just plunked down \$20 to cultivate a 6-by-12-foot plot for the season. The Brooklyn native was thrilled with his luck.

"When your hands are in the dirt, it's the way we were meant to be," said Papagni, who is an experienced home chef living in the West End. "I don't know if there is anything better than planting and sitting down to eat what you grow."

Pointing to the sign that warns passers-by "Please Don't Pick," he admitted, "I am a little concerned I might not get to eat the things I grow."

Unlike gardeners in more rural areas, it's not deer or foxes this urban farmer is worried about. Though another sign warns: "These garden plots belong to people in the community. Please respect their hard work and do not touch the plants or vegetables," theft happens.

Bayside Community Garden coordinator Deborah Van Hoewyk says the 27 beds located in this open tract on Chestnut Street are hard to police.

"People steal the produce, sleep in the gardens and use it as a latrine," she said.

Despite that reality, there is a waiting list.

"Urban gardening is very hot right now. It comes and goes. The farm-to-table movement that says food should be fresh and food should be local" drives the trend, she said.

Like tiny house living, gardening in confined spaces takes planning and pluck. Urban gardeners must decide "where to locate the



TROY R. BENNETT | BDN

Laura Mailander (from left) and Nyaruot Nguany of Cultivating Community help resident Jimmy Makowiecki identify a weed in his rooftop garden plot at 409 Cumberland Ave. in Portland recently. Building residents can each get a 5-by-5-foot plot of gardening space.

plants and how many to plant," said Van Hoewyk. "You are not going to plant a pumpkin patch" or endless rows of tomatoes.

The other thing to remember is time. Out of sight shouldn't mean out of mind.

"It takes work. It's a commitment. It's not that you throw some seeds in June and come back to a bounty all summer," said Van Hoewyk. "You can't abandon it." She suggests urban gardeners

start with herbs, which "take less space and enhance your meals, no matter what you are cooking."

Greens for salads are another winner.

"People can grow a wide variety. We have one man who grows black chickpeas, Asian veggies. Garlic, which you plant in the fall and harvest in the spring, is another good option," said Van Hoewyk.

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