Dandelions: The Uncommon Weed

1 What starts out yellow and ends up as a fluffy white ball? If I told you it was *Taraxacum officinale*, would that ring a bell? What if I told you it was of the family *Compositae*—would that excite your senses?

2 If you haven’t figured it out by now, the subject of which I am speaking is none other than the common, ordinary dandelion. Yes, those bright, yellow flowers which we all, as kids, eagerly snapped off the stems while chanting the words, “Mama had a baby and its head popped off!” I’m sure all of us remember having blown the fluffy white tufts into the air above.

3 Although we have these pleasant memories from our childhoods, most homeowners consider the dandelion as the most irritating and troublesome of all the weeds—partly because their deep root system makes them almost impossible to get rid of. However, from a botany class, I learned that the dandelion, in reality, is a very useful plant. From further research, I discovered that the dandelion has both wide medical and culinary uses. Today, I will explain these uses to you. We’ll start by looking at the dandelion’s medicinal value.

4 The scientific name of the dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, testifies to its value as a medicine. According to Edward Spencer, in his book *All About Dandelions*, *Taraxacum* refers to medical properties of a plant found in Persia. *Officinale*, the species name, when given to any plant, indicates that it is used by druggists and pharmacists.

5 Throughout history, dandelions have been used to help cure various medical ailments. Dandelions were reportedly used by the ancient Egyptians to treat kidney and stomach disorders. The dandelion’s many cures were recorded by Arabian physicians in the tenth century. And in sixteenth-century England, dandelion waters were used in the treatment of illness among the nobility.

6 Today, scientists know as a fact that the dandelion has great medicinal value. According to Mea Allan, in her book *Weeds*, the plant contains chemicals that stimulate blood circulation, the liver, digestive organs, and especially the kidneys and bladder—which has gained the dandelion fame as a so-called “potty herb.” Audrey Hatfield, in her book *How to Enjoy Your Weeds*, says that a tea made from dandelion roots or leaves is helpful in relieving many conditions. It helps relieve liver and lung disorders, and it helps treat anemia. In addition, it serves as a mild laxative and is helpful in aiding digestion. Hatfield also suggests that dandelion tea is highly effective in cases of eczema, scurvy, and similar skin conditions. So valuable is the dandelion in treating medical ailments that 100,000 pounds are imported into the United States each year for this purpose.

7 If you have no interest in using dandelions for your health, you can still find them of use in the kitchen. Historically, dandelions have been used as food for thousands of years. According to an article in *National Wildlife* magazine, they were among the original bitter herbs of Passover, a Jewish holiday which commemorates the Hebrews’ liberation from slavery.
in Egypt. The English have been using dandelions in salads since the Middle Ages. And currently, many ethnic groups in the United States—such as Greeks, Poles, French, Italians, and even the Amish—all eat dandelions.

8 II parts of the dandelion can be utilized to make a variety of delicious foods. Its bitter leaves, if picked before the yellow flowers appear, can be added to a salad. The leaves are usually mixed with other vegetables to vary their flavor. The dandelion's roots may be roasted in an oven, then ground and used as a caffeine-free coffee substitute. The golden yellow flowers can be steeped in water and then used to produce a delicious wine. And the entire dandelion plant may be used to make beer.

9 In addition to being tasty, dandelions are extremely nutritious. According to Peter Gail, a professor of economic botany at Cleveland State University, "The dandelion's nutrient qualities read almost like a One-a-Day vitamin." Dandelion greens have 50 percent more vitamin C than tomatoes, twice as much protein as eggplant, and double the fiber of asparagus. They have as much iron as spinach and more potassium than bananas.

10 All of this may sound strange to you, but not to the people of Vineland, New Jersey, the official Dandelion Capital of the World. In Vineland, the dandelion has grown from being a $68,000 crop in 1977 to almost a half-million-dollar crop today. At the beginning of the season, dandelions sell for as much as $1.25 a pound. Most of Vineland's dandelion crop ends up in restaurants and markets in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City.

11 Every March the town hosts its annual seven-course dandelion dinner. The menu consists of dandelion soup, dandelion salad, dandelion sausage, dandelions and vegetables, dandelion beef roulade, dandelion sweet cup, and dandelion wine. Tickets for the dinner sell for $25 apiece, with people coming from as far away as Ohio. Former Vineland mayor Patrick Fiorilli has humorously summed up Vineland's position in the dandelion world: "In your yard, you go out and pull the dandelions out of the grass. Our farmers pull the grass out of the dandelions."

12 As we have seen, then, the dandelion is a greatly misunderstood plant. Despite its reputation as an irritating weed, in reality it is a very useful plant. Having various medical and culinary uses, the dandelion stands as one of the most underrated and least appreciated plants in the world. Hopefully, in the future, more people will come to recognize the usefulness of the dandelion, thereby reestablishing this "common" weed as a truly uncommon plant.
Dandelions: The Uncommon Weed

Commentary

Creative, crisply organized, and packed with fascinating supporting materials, "Dandelions: The Uncommon Weed" is a fine example of how to produce a captivating informative speech on a seemingly ordinary topic. Here is a synopsis of the speech.

Specific Purpose: To inform my audience about the medical and culinary uses of dandelions.

Central Idea: Despite its reputation as an irritating weed, the dandelion's medical and culinary properties make it a very useful plant.

Method of Organization: Topical

Introduction: The speaker opens with a series of three rhetorical questions that capture attention by arousing the audience's curiosity. She follows, in paragraph 2, by revealing the subject of her speech and by relating it directly to the audience. In paragraph 3 she establishes her credibility and previews the main points to be discussed in the body. All in all, this is an excellent example of an introduction for a speech to inform.

Body: Organized in topical order, the body of this speech contains two main points. The first, running from paragraph 4 through paragraph 6, explores the medical uses of dandelions. After explaining that the scientific name of the dandelion, Taraxacum officinale, indicates that the plant is used by druggists and pharmacists (paragraph 4), the speaker notes some of the ways it has been employed throughout history to cure medical ailments (paragraph 5). In paragraph 6 she relates what modern medical science knows about the medical value of dandelions. Because she is not a medical expert, she is careful to identify the sources of her information.

In paragraph 7 the speaker turns to her second main point, which continues through paragraph 11. This point deals with the culinary uses of dandelions and, like the first main point, is brought to life with a variety of intriguing supporting materials. In paragraph 7 the speaker provides historical facts about some of the ways different cultures have used dandelions as food through the years. In paragraph 8 she notes how dandelions can be used in salads, as the basis for a caffeine-free coffee substitute, and to produce wine or beer. In paragraph 9 she cites Peter Gail, a professor of economic botany at Cleveland State University, to establish the nutritional value of dandelions.

Paragraphs 10-11 present the story of Vineland, New Jersey, "Dandelion Capital of the World." Entertaining as well as informative, the story brings the speaker's ideas to life and gives them human interest. Its details about the size of Vineland's dandelion crop, the price per pound of dandelions, and the seven-course dandelion dinner are crucial. One way to communicate this to students is to have them imagine how much less effective the speech
would have been if the speaker had merely said, "Dandelions are very important to the people of Vineland, New Jersey."

It is also worth noting how clearly the body of the speech is organized and how the speaker uses ample connectives to help listeners keep track of her ideas. Equally important, those ideas are presented in straightforward, nontechnical language.

Conclusion: The conclusion consists of paragraph 12 and is short and to the point. The phrase "As we have seen" cues listeners that the speech is coming to an end. The speaker then summarizes her main points and ends by restating her central idea—that, despite its negative reputation, the dandelion is a very useful plant.