



## Why Is It Called a Dandelion?

by Marilyn Loser

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I've often wondered how flowers got their names, especially the flowers that grow in my Alamosa garden. The bright yellow heads of dandelions I pull from my yard don't seem "dandy" or lion-like at all. Little did I know the name comes from the leaf shape. The English used to call the yellow, shaggy weed a "lion's tooth" because the jagged, pointed leaves resemble a lion's snarly grin. During the early 14th century, the lion's-tooth plant took on a French flavor and became the dent-de-lion, "tooth-of-the-lion." Then it acquired an English accent: dandelion. It is native to southern Europe.

Columbine. Our own state flower name comes directly from classic Latin. "Columba" means dove. People thought the blue, purple, white, pink, and yellow inverted blossoms looked like a cluster of five doves.

Daisy. Have you ever noticed that daisies open in the day and close at night? Poet Geoffrey Chaucer referred to the sun as "the day's eye or the eye of the day." The sunburst center and radiant petals of this flower look like an eye, and like an eye, it opens up at the beginning of each day. So in Old English, people called it the "eye of the day" or "day's eye" which later became "daisy."

Lilac. The word means "blue." The origin of the name is from the Persian "nilak" (bluish) which passed into Arabic as "laylak." In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the plant was brought into England by the Spanish, who called it "lilac". The word was then borrowed by the English. Lilacs originated in southeastern Europe and were introduced into the United States in the 1700s.

Pansy. These are one of my favorite flowers. Someone thought the flower looked like it had a thoughtful face, hence "pensee" in French, which means "thoughtful". This was later turned into pansy. I like to grow them indoors in pots starting around mid-March. I started doing this when we'd travel south during spring break to find warmer weather. New Mexico nurseries always have the cheerful bedding plants then.

Edelweiss. This is the national flower of Austria. In German, "edel" means noble and "weiss" means white. Edelweiss was considered a symbol of bravery because it was dangerous and difficult to climb up to the high, craggy areas where the flowers grew to obtain them. Who knew this perennial would do well in my Alamosa garden year after year?

Nasturtium. I grow these tender annuals in pots as I've had them freeze when I grew them in the ground. The ground air during a cold snap killed them several times. Neighborhood children love having a flower they can eat. I like the peppery flavor in summer salads. Nasturtium literally translates to "nose-twister". Latin *Nasus tortus* meaning convulsed nose referring to the faces people make when eating the spicy plant.

Nasturtium was first found growing in Mexico and Peru where it was used to flavor foods instead of cress. It was brought to Europe in the 16th century and considered a symbol of conquest and victory in battle. Victorian women later used it in "tussie mussies" to ward off bad smells. All parts of the plant are edible. To some, the leaves taste like watercress and people use them in stir-fry dishes. The seed pods can be pickled and used as a garnish that is similar to capers. I've never tried pickling them.

Delphinium and larkspur. This group of flowers is native to Europe and Siberia. Delphinium comes from the Greek word "delphis" meaning dolphin. It refers to the shape of the back of the flower which resembles a dolphin's snout. In other countries it was thought to resemble a lark's foot and was called larkspur. Some say the Greeks named this flower after Delphinium Apollo, the god of the city of Delphi.

Iris. A colorful group of 200 to 300 species (depends upon who is counting), 'iris' is Greek for rainbow. The flower is named for the Greek goddess of the rainbow. In France, it is called the "fleur-de-lis" or lily flower (water plant), which was taken as a symbol of the Empire by the French monarchy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

This column was inspired by an article in the San Diego Union-Tribune written by Richard Lederer.

*"There's little risk in becoming overly proud of one's garden because gardening by its very nature is humbling. It has a way of keeping you on your knees."* Joanne R. Barwick