



Transplanting Dandelions

The perennial dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, is a ground hugging plant with pretty yellow flowers that attract tortoises. The dark green leaves are one of the best foods that you can plant for your tortoise.

Early spring and fall are the best times to transplant dandelions. Find a source of growing dandelions that has not been sprayed with pesticides or herbicides. There are dandelion relatives that you may find as volunteers in your yard. The most common volunteers are annuals. They also produce a yellow flower heads but along a spindly stem. They grow to several feet tall and are not suited to lawns. These annuals are particularly invasive and you will want to dig them up before they go to seed. Do this only after you can distinguish them from the perennial dandelion that you want to nurture.

Before digging up the dandelions from your source, think about where to plant them. They like sun and shade. If you plant dandelions in a patch the tortoise will tend to feed heavily on the patch, not letting it recover. You need to hide dandelions in the lawn by planting them singly at least 3 feet apart. The tortoise will find them but your crop is more likely to survive for many years.

Make sure that the soil in your lawn is moist enough for you to poke a 6"-8" hole to receive the root. You will need a bucket of water for the dandelions and a commercial weeder that looks like a heavy screwdriver but the tip is forked.

Dig up the dandelions from your source using the weeder. If the soil is hard, water the plants deeply before beginning. Push the weeder into the soil deeply from close to the top of the root. Rock the weeder back and forth to loosen the soil. Do this all around the base. Roots will be longer than you think and fragile enough to break easily if you try to pull out the plant before the soil is sufficiently loosened. If the tip breaks the plant can survive but is more apt to die from transplant shock. If the leaves and crown break free of the root, feed the leaves to your tortoise. If the crown remains on the root, it should survive. The plants in the bucket can be planted the next day if kept cool. Before you start to transplant purchase a vitamin-hormone preparation such as Superthrive to prevent transplant shock that can kill in warm weather.

Transplant your dandelions in a cool part of the day. Make the hole with your weeder to as close to the length of the root as possible. After you plant a dandelion, press the soil around the root and pour a generous amount of water over the plant. Plants lose moisture through their leaves so cut the leaves to about 1" from the root crown to prevent shock and wilting. Offer these tops to your tortoise. Put them in water till you can bag and refrigerate. To plant the next dandelion, move several feet away. When your are finished, water each plant again and repeat this two or more times a day for several days.

