

## WEEDS IN MY GARDEN (Part 6)

It is not surprising that a huge family like the Compositae (the daisy family) should contribute extensively and energetically to the weed population of our gardens.

I do not think it necessary to say anything about the common daisy (Bellis perennis) but a word might be said about the equally common dandelion (Taraxacum officinale), for troublesome as it is, it has many uses. For centuries its attractive flower heads have been used in country places for the popular dandelion wine. The leaves are sometimes eaten in salads and a special large-leaved variety is sometimes grown for this purpose as it lacks the active drug principle. I am not aware which particular form this is and would be glad of information concerning it. Actually dandelion is an extremely variable plant and in England some forms have been described as distinct species. But soil and situation have great influence on its growth. Hutchinson states that the genus Taraxacum is still evolving rapidly.

Medicinally the root is the important part. It is to be noted also that a coffee substitute has been made from the root. I take rather a dim view of coffee substitutes, but am assured that this particular one is quite palatable.

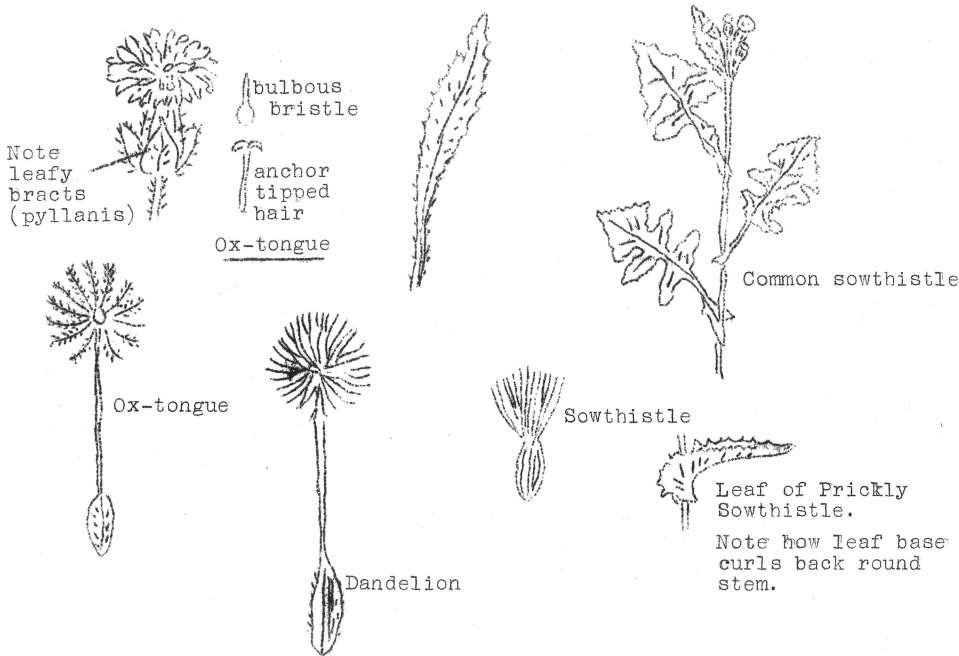
There are a noticeable number of harassing weeds with yellow dandelion-like heads. One of the most persistent is the sowthistle.

The common sowthistle (Sonchus oleraceus) often reaches four and even more feet high, and its somewhat thick stem is hollow. Its leaves are deeply cut. Like dandelion, the fruits have soft hairs which enable them to float all over the garden in uncounted thousands. But the hairs of sowthistles grow directly from the fruit and not from a stalk as in the case of the dandelion.

Closely related to the common sowthistle is the prickly sowthistle (Sonchus asper). This does not seem to be so common and appears to be later putting in an appearance. As the name suggests, it is prickly. If you want to distinguish the two, and they are much alike, simply squeeze the leaves of asper in your hand and you will notice they are prickly though not sharply so. If the plant is young and the prickles still soft, look at the leaves, where they meet the stem. The auricles - outgrowths at the bases of the leaves - of asper curl backwards and touch each other while those of the common sowthistle are free. These two species hybridize, and hybrids have been reported from a number of localities. Allan lists both plants as suspected of being poisonous.

Another composite with strap-shaped yellow flowers that is very happy in my garden just now is the Ox-tongue (Helminthia echinodes). It has the merit of being readily recognisable from the green leaf alone, even before the branched flowering stem springs up. It grows up to three feet and more high and both stems and leaves are covered with characteristic stiff bristly hairs as well as bristles. The hairs are remarkable in that they have anchor-like tips, thus providing the botanist with an easy "spotting point". The radical leaves are toothed and stalked but the stem leaves are stalkless.

Another distinctive feature of this plant is the involucre of bracts round the flower heads. The inner bracts (about ten) are narrow and erect with a long bristle-like appendage below the apex. But the outer ones are unusual in the family and distinctive in that they consist of five leafy calyx-like bracts with heart shaped bases. So there is really no excuse for not recognising an ox-tongue when you see it!



In the sketch of the different fruits it will be noted that sowthistle has its ring of pappus hairs seated direct on the fruit (an achene) dandelion has its pappus seated on a long stalk, while ox-tongue has pappus hairs not only at the end of a stalk, but also the hairs themselves are plumose (i.e. branched like the barbs of a feather). Characteristics of this kind are important among the composites and help us to distinguish the genera from each other.

Phyllary is an important technical term in identification of composites. It is the name given to the little bracts that grow round the receptacle of the flower head. You will find the term frequently arises in keys to the genera and species.