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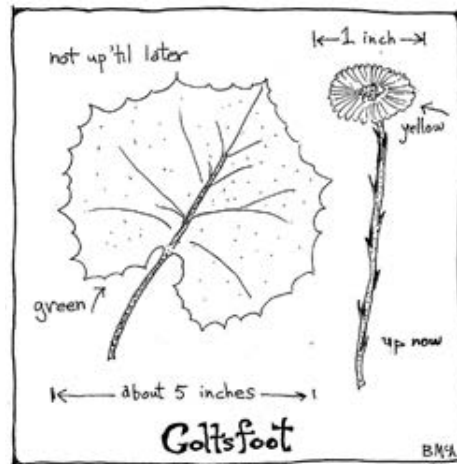


Coltsfoot, on the Roadsides and at Pharmacies

Many of us go zipping along the roads in our speedy conveyances, with our minds elsewhere: What did I forget? How late am I? Or maybe we entertain regrets such as: argh, it is starting to rain—should have gone back for my umbrella. Distractions like these can keep us from noticing the first wildflowers of spring, little yellow ones along the roadside. Even if we do spot them as we whiz by, we are likely to think: hmm, dandelions. Or if our antennae are more tuned up, it could be: hmm, dandelions with no leaves.

They do look like dandelions, except for lack of leaves and other details. The fleshy flower stalk is stout and complicated, with small scale-like non-green leaves all up and down. Also, this yellow blossom is flat across, not domed like a dandelion. These things are hard to spot from the driver's seat, so folks traveling on foot are more likely to realize they are seeing coltsfoot.

In earlier times, when we all walked, coltsfoot was well-known and treasured. Later in the spring, when the flower has gone to seed and is all fluffy (like a dandelion), the big green leaves appear, and they look like their name. They have the shape of the foot of a colt, or the bottom surface of such a foot. Old-timers knew the leaf because it was so valued as a medicine. When physicians and botanists got



together to name the plant, they called it Tussilago, which is Latin for cough drop.

Pedanius Dioscorides was a pharmacologist and a medic in the Roman army two thousand years ago. He wrote *Materia Medica*, a five-volume encyclopedia that was used for the next many hundreds of years. If you could read, you could learn about six hundred plants, including our own coltsfoot. Most people could not read, though, so the drugstores of the day painted a coltsfoot leaf on the door to let folks know this was the place to buy medicine. What a change, this modern world, in which we drive to town for a cough drop but don't recognize coltsfoot by the road. It might help us make the association if Rite-Aid would paint a leaf on the door.

Rite-Aid is a fascinating place, but so is the side of the road. Coltsfoot came here centuries ago, brought by settlers who could not manage without it. In lat-

er years (1850s), someone who noticed coltsfoot in his neighborhood was Minot Pratt of Concord, Henry Thoreau's friend and walking companion. Pratt was part of the utopian Brook Farm community near Boston and wrote *Plants of Concord*, in which he described coltsfoot.

We might not find coltsfoot at the drugstore these days, and maybe our stretch of roadside features other sorts of treasures. But if we are literate we can shop online and find coltsfoot tea. We can read a book. Euell Gibbons, writing in a recent century, says the dried leaves can be smoked to soothe a cough or cure a lung ailment. He also gives a recipe for those cough drops in his *Stalking the Healthful Herbs* (David McKay Co., NY, 1966.)

How ironic that coltsfoot has gone from being an international sign for healthy medicine to its current listing as a "noxious" or invasive plant in Massachusetts. This is hard to believe. Birds like the fluff for lining nests, folks once used it as tinder for flintlock candle lighters, and Henry Thoreau rejoiced as its "bright palette signals the last of winter." He liked winter perfectly well, as well as everything else outdoors, but this is April, bringing coltsfoot and the particular thrill of the new season.

— Bonner McAllester