



Blue roadside flowers have flavor

By Susan Yost

What plant has stunning blue flowers, grows along roadsides and in meadows, and is used as a coffee substitute?

The answer is chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), a common weedy wildflower with sky-blue blossoms.

All summer long, on my way to work in the morning, I've admired these flowers along the roadside, blooming on upright stems up to a few feet tall. Later in the day, these plants become far less noticeable, as the flowers close in the afternoon (as well as on cloudy days). This plant, so familiar along our roadsides, is actually a native of Europe which has now become a cosmopolitan weed.

Chicory is in the daisy or composite family (Asteraceae or Compositae to botanists). As in other members of this family, including daisies, sunflowers, dandelions and black-eyed Susan, what appears to be one flower is actually a cluster of flowers; hence the common name "composite" for the family.

Each chicory "petal" is actually an entire flower with the petals fused together, which is why, if you look very closely, you'll see five tiny teeth on each "petal."

Each of these flowers has the typical male (stamens) and female (pistils) reproductive parts.

The flower cluster or inflorescence is called a "head."

The familiar dandelion has a very similar flower structure, but is yellow.

Chicory is used as a coffee additive, especially in Louisiana, to make coffee more mellow and aromatic. It's also sold commercially as a caffeine-free coffee substitute, and as an ingredient in herbal teas.



Submitted photo

Chicory is a common roadside plant.

Chicory can be prepared by digging up the fleshy, white taproots, roasting them in the oven until dark brown and brittle, grinding them, and then preparing like coffee (1/2 teaspoon per cup of water). This beverage is described as having a rich caramel flavor.

To me, chicory smells and tastes pleasantly sweet and a little like dried figs.

In addition, the very young leaves of chicory can be used in salads. Young leaves can also be boiled and eaten, but older leaves are too bitter to eat. However, the salad green sold as chicory in supermarkets is actually a different species, *Cichorium endiva*. Other

familiar supermarket greens, radicchio, escarole, and endive, are also in the same genus as chicory, *Cichorium*.

So, the next time you see "chicory" listed as a beverage ingredient, you can identify it as the common roadside plant with the electric-blue flowers.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.