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Reprinted from the  
*Wild Ones Journal*,  
Sept/Oct 2005 issue.

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## Fluff & Fuzz

By Barbara Bray



Image courtesy: [www.javajane.co.uk](http://www.javajane.co.uk).

What is it about non-native dandelions that attracts so many children to them? When most people are scrutinizing their lawns for the first sign of these invaders, children are anxiously awaiting their appearance. They will pick them singly or in bouquets. They might pop the "heads" off or peel the hollow stems into curly strips. But this all leads up to the most exciting event – when the dandelion goes to seed! Other flowers have seeds, of course, but the fuzzy seed-head of the dandelion is absolutely irresistible to children. One light puff of breath blown onto the dandelion seed-head sends the seeds aloft like a battalion of army parachute-jumpers. Can we take advantage of this interest?

Soft, fuzzy things are so enticing to touch. Think about all the stuffed animals children love to collect on their beds. Think about how we all love to pet baby animals, like kittens, puppies, or chicks. We wear fuzzy clothes like sweaters and socks. In our homes, we have fuzzy carpeting, fuzzy blankets, and fuzzy towels. Sometimes we even have fuzzy "dust bunnies" under our sofas. Fuzz is everywhere, yet how often do we stop to look at it?

With a simple magnifying glass, you can send your children around the house on a "fuzz hunt." Although fuzz comes from many different sources – animal and plant – it really is all alike. It is made up of tiny threads called fibers. Most fuzz is made

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up of short fibers, but there are also some that are very long. Fuzz is important for warmth because it can trap air and slow down the escape of heat. Sheep's wool, animal fur, and hair all do this, and are called good insulators. Fuzz can be used to make things. Examine the fibers in a cotton rag. Pull out a thread and explain that the cotton rag was spun from cotton fibers. Examine real cotton balls if you have them. Other interesting materials to look at are old silk scarves (made from fibers in silk-moth cocoons) and paper (made from tree fibers).

The fuzz hunt does not have to end inside the house. Many plants have interesting adaptations for seed dispersal. Native cottonwood trees send their cotton-topped seeds floating through the air in late spring. The green pods that sometimes fall to the ground before opening are fun to pull apart and find the "cotton" inside. Toward fall, milkweed plants release their seeds on fluffy fibers so soft that early pioneers once stuffed pillows and mattresses with the fluff.

Fuzzy cattail seeds can easily spread into new wet spots by floating away on the wind. Fuzz also provides protection for plants from both heat and cold. Prairie smoke and pasque flower are two examples of early-blooming prairie plants. Both have fuzz on their leaves and stems to protect them from the cold. Other plants have fuzz on their stems and leaves to create minute amounts of shade, shielding the plant surface from intense sunlight. This adaptation, seen in many prairie plants, such as stiff goldenrod, compass plant, and blackeyed Susans, helps also to prevent water loss. How many other plants can you find that have fuzzy leaves and stems?

When you finish your "fuzz hunt," you might find that you want to know even more.

To learn how to become a "fuzz scientist," see: *Fuzz Does It!* by Vicki Cobb; 1982; J. B. Lippincott: New York.

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