

Stinging Nettle Information Sheet



Introduction

The stinging nettle is one of the most recognisable plants, mainly because of the burning sensation caused when the skin comes into contact with the plant's leaves, but is it also known for the numerous therapeutical benefits.

Did you know The nettle's sting is an adaptation to provide protection from herbivores to eat them?

Different names

The stinging nettle's scientific name is *Urtica dioica*: 'urtica' is derived from a Latin word meaning 'sting' and 'dioica' is derived from Greek, and means 'of two houses' (having separate staminate and pistillate plants; dioecious)

The English name **nettle** can trace to the Old English word netel.

The Spanish name **Ortiga** originated from the Latin urtica (meaning to burn).

In Sweden, it is called **Brännässla** (bränna + nässla). The word bränna means the burning discomfort one suffers upon contact with the leaves. The word nässla means nettle.

The Maltese name is **Hurrieq**, literally meaning 'the burner', or 'burning plant'.



From the above, one can easily conclude that the irritation and pain caused by the leaves has greatly influenced the name of this plant across different cultures and languages.

Funders and partner organisations

Green Recovery Challenge Fund



The National Lottery Heritage Fund



Language

A Spanish proverb says that “Desde chica, la ortiga pica” (From childhood, nettle stings).

In the English language, the plant’s name has given rise to the verb ‘to nettle’, meaning to irritate or annoy someone.

In Malta, the Red Admiral butterfly is known as ‘Farfett tal-Hurrieq’, literally Nettle Butterfly, because it sometimes lays its eggs on nettle leaves.



Traditions and beliefs

In Spain, it used to be recommended that one had to hold one’s breath to avoid the annoying urticaria that comes from contact with a nettle.

In Sweden, it used to be recommended that one should roll naked in a nettle bush before sunrise to have happiness and prosperity for the rest of one’s life.

In Malta, when a garden or a field became overgrown with nettles, it was believed that this was the work of an anonymous enemy who sowed the seeds in the dead of the night to get his/her revenge).



In Spain, Sweden and the UK, nettle was commonly used as a source of food, because once cooked, the leaves lose their lacerating power and have a pleasant taste. They were eaten as a vegetable, as a soup, in omelettes, etc.

In Sweden, they were also utilised to make beer.

Below is a traditional nettle soup recipe from the UK.

- Pick your nettles by pinching off the fresh leaves at the tip of the plant, leaving the plant itself intact. It's best to do this in the spring when the vitamin content is highest, before the flowers appear.
- Rinse your nettle tips in cold water, and cut off any woody bits or thick stems. You need to wear gloves while you handle them, but once the nettles are cooked you can safely eat them without any stinging.
- Melt some butter in the bottom of the soup pot, add a chopped onion or two, and cook slowly until softened.
- Add a litre or so of vegetable or chicken stock, with salt, pepper, and any herbs you fancy.
- Add 2 large potatoes (chopped), a large carrot (chopped), and simmer until almost soft. If you like your soup thick, use more potatoes.
- Throw in several large handfuls of fresh nettle leaves, and simmer gently for another 10 minutes.
- Add some cream (to taste), and a pinch of nutmeg. Purée with a blender, and serve. (If you happen to have some truffle oil in your pantry, a light sprinkling on the soup tastes terrific.)



Traditional medicine



Nettle is mentioned as a medicinal plant in the oldest known treatises. The leaves have purifying, diuretic, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, circulatory and nourishing properties. In external use, they are used as an analgesic remedy (for pain).

In Sweden nettle was used against rheumatism, and to purify the blood. It is also good for skin disorders and diseases of the respiratory system. It also found use as a toner.

In Malta, it was widely used in the past to cure anemia and digestive problems. Both the boiled leaves and the water used to boil the leaves were used for treatment.

Other uses

Nettles once rivaled flax and hemp (and later, cotton) as a staple fiber for thread and yarn, used to make everything from heavy sailcloth to fine table linen up to the 17th/18th centuries. (During the First World War, the scarcity of certain fabrics made many people turn back to nettles.)

In the 19th century, other fibers proved more economical as the making of cloth became more mechanized, but in some areas (such as the highlands of Scotland) nettle cloth is still made to this day.

“In Scotland, I have eaten nettles,” said the 18th century poet Thomas Campbell, “I have slept in nettle sheets, and I have dined off a nettle tablecloth. The young and tender nettle is an excellent potherb. The stalks of the old nettle are as good as flax for making cloth. I have heard my mother say that she thought nettle cloth more durable than any other linen.”



Stinging Nettles are important

Nettles might not be the most popular or prettiest plant growing in your garden, they might not have a pleasant aroma, they might also cause you pain... but they're so good for wildlife and biodiversity!

Nettles are amazing because...

- They support over 40 different kinds of insects;
- The insects, which use the nettle sting as a shield, provide food for ladybirds;
- Aphids on nettles provide food for blue tits and other woodland birds;
- The seeds provide food for bullfinches, house sparrows and chaffinches;
- Some moths and butterflies feed at the top of the nettles;
- Many little creatures lay their eggs on nettles, such as the Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock and Comma butterflies.



A space for the nettle in your garden

Rather than growing nettles in a dark corner of the garden, try to leave a patch of them in a sunny area. This helps to attract the insects and they're more likely to lay their eggs.

If you're growing an insect friendly garden to encourage wildlife, allow the stinging plants to grow in at least one area of your garden.

