

Stinging Nettles

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Nettles: The Sting—"Minor" Healing Properties—"Major"

The common stinging nettle is one of the most valuable medicinal plants in the entire plant kingdom. If people knew its value, they would harvest as much as they can gather rather than killing it with herbicides. I had been "out" of my supply of nettles and was determined this spring to get a bunch of tender nettles before it starts to flower. Since all of my past harvesting patches were too far away or were on private property that has changed owners, I called up an old friend and told her my dilemma. As synchronicity would have it, she, too, was seeking a nettles patch for a therapeutic salve she makes. After gathering quite a bit, I felt it was important to share with you the amazing properties of this plant, how to use each part of the plant, and the amazing health benefits you can gain from using it daily in the spring, or any other time you need it.

Nettles (*Urtica dioica*)—The Europeans used this plant for its medicinal properties for centuries. It is clear that the miraculous healing properties of nettles were well known since variations of the following phrase have been cited in several historical herbal books: "The sting of the nettle is but nothing compared to the pains it heals."

Nettles grow near streams and moist bogs, in sun or in the shade, where the soil is rich. It is a perennial that can reach as high as three to four feet in the summer. The erect, square-shaped stem is densely covered with stinging hairs as are the underside of the leaves, which are ovate, tapering to a point with saw-like teeth on the sides. The sting is caused when the prickly hairs contact the skin that contains an

irritating substance containing histamine and formic acid.

It is for this reason that anyone who values the plant's properties and gathers it knows to wear gloves. I would have been better off wearing longer gloves since I experienced the constant warmth from the stinging sharp "hairs" for about 20 hours following harvesting. For me, it was not so unpleasant that I felt I needed to take emergency action – while others who have more sensitive skin should definitely wear more protective clothing while harvesting.

Medicinal properties, traditional uses

Nettles are a rich green color revealing its extremely high iron and chlorophyll content. It is also very high in the minerals calcium, magnesium, silicon, sulfur, copper, chromium, zinc, cobalt, potassium and phosphorus. Nettles also contain high amounts of vitamins A, C, D, E, and K as well as riboflavin and thiamine.

In Europe the nettle fiber was used instead of cotton and flax in clothing. The Europeans gathered the young plants in the spring when they were about a foot tall and would cook it as a vegetable, just as we use spinach today, the taste being similar but milder. It was used as both a spring tonic and in the treatment of scurvy. In Sweden and Russia, nettles were used as a fodder plant, the sting being lost when the plant is cut and left to wilt. During World War I the Germans used it as fodder and discovered that horses that had become thin due to digestive problems benefited when nettles were added to their rations. They also found that, by adding nettles to poultry food, egg production increased. In Britain, a fresh bunch of nettles is hung in the larder to ward off flies. In Russia it is used as a valued antiseptic and astringent. The dried, pulverized herb is sniffed to stop nose bleeding. A strong infusion is used to improve heart action, for headaches and for any internal bleeding, especially after childbirth.

The entire nettles plant—stems, leaves, flowers and roots—has powerful medicinal properties. According to Swiss herbalist Abbé Kuenzle, nettles would have been wiped out long ago were it not for its stings since insects and wild animals would have eaten it away. When I read about this I had to laugh since every fall our comfrey patch is eaten down to the roots, and if we didn't do something about the gophers, we probably wouldn't have any comfrey at all.

My introduction to nettles

I wouldn't have known the power of nettles if it were not for an elderly lady who came into Gentle Strength Food Coop in Tempe, Arizona, when I worked in the herb section in 1985. She would buy a fairly large amount of dried nettles for tea once a week. I asked her what she used it for and she told me that she had suffered from severe back pain and arthritis. She told me she was completely pain-free after quitting coffee and drinking three cups of nettles tea daily. She felt so good that she shared her recipe for renewed health with her friends in the retirement community where she lived so that they, too, could experience relief from arthritis, rheumatism and osteoporosis.

More benefits

Nettles are specific for the kidneys, being useful in expelling gravel from the bladder and dissolving kidney stones. It is a powerful blood purifier that drives out toxins and metabolic wastes by stimulating the kidneys to excrete more water. Nettles tea will clean out the entire intestinal tract while activating the body's natural defense mechanisms. The tea will also kill and expel intestinal worms. A strong infusion (tea) is helpful in the treatment of dysentery, diarrhea, hemorrhoids and inflammation of the kidneys. It is also useful in the treatment of asthma since it helps expel phlegm from the lungs.

In the book, "The Family Herbal," authors Barbara and Peter Theiss recommend nettles tea as a long-term stimulation therapy for allergies, for people with poor complexions and as an additional discharging therapy in connection with all types of rheumatism and gout.

"We know of several cases where hay fever has been completely cured by drinking stinging nettle tea everyday from November through April, until the pollen season begins. You can easily see for yourself that stinging nettle has a diuretic effect: You will urinate more frequently and, in addition, the urine will tend to take on a darker color and stronger smell during the first few days of drinking the tea. People who have a predisposition to kidney stones have a chance to prevent them by drinking the tea regularly...The diuretic effect of the stinging nettle is also reflected in the strong, urine-like scent of the fully mature plant." ~The Family Herbal, p. 49

In her famous book "Health Through God's Pharmacy," Maria Trebbin recounts how she told a mother of seven children who suffered from eczema and headaches to drink nettles tea. In a short time she was free from both the headaches and eczema. Since the cause of both eczema and headaches is an accumulation of toxins internally, the blood-cleansing and blood-building properties of nettles resolved her health problems. Trebbin also noted that nettles assists in lowering blood sugar, having a healing effect on the pancreas. Her book is filled with stories that give people hope; especially those who have tried allopathic medicine only to find their conditions worsen:

"An elderly man who came to me three years ago had influenza. Since that time his urine was dark brown and he suffered from terrible headaches. Neither the prescribed medications he took nor the injections (lately in the head) brought relief. On the contrary, the headaches became worse; he was close to committing suicide. I gave him hope and recommended stinging nettle. He was to drink 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ liters of the tea throughout the

day. After four days he rang up to say that he felt better than even before the influenza.”

Describing a different case, Trebbin wrote, “In our small town I met a woman who suffered from cancerous growths in her stomach. She could not decide to have an operation because of her age. Someone told her to drink Stinging Nettle tea. So, every day, she went into her garden to pick a handful of Stinging Nettle from along the fence, where they grew in abundance. When, after a time, she went to see the doctor, he asked in surprise: ‘What happened?’ The growths had disappeared and the woman could enjoy a healthy old age.”

Trebbin tells her readers that we should never let a condition get that far since a malignant growth would never form if we valued stinging nettle enough to drink it as a tea at regular intervals.

Susan Weed in her book, “Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year,” highly recommends drinking both nettles and raspberry leaf tea throughout pregnancy. She specifically recommends drinking nettle tea during the last month of pregnancy to insure that large amounts of vitamin K are in the blood for the birth.

She recalls a woman who was told she would need to be put on a dialysis machine and used nettles tea as a part of her therapy to rebuild her kidneys, thus avoiding the dialysis machine. According to Weed: “Since the kidneys must cleanse 150 percent of the normal blood volume for most of the pregnancy, Nettles’ ability to nourish and strengthen them is of major importance. Any accumulation of minerals in the kidneys, such as gravel and stones, is gently loosened, dissolved and eliminated by the consistent use of Nettle infusions.”

Nettles are used to increase fertility in both men and women. Due to its high calcium content, the tea is specific for easing leg cramps and other muscles spasms, and also

diminishes pain during and after birth.

Parting thoughts

We will end here by saying that humble stinging nettles is one of the most valuable plants in the herb kingdom, having the ability to cure “whatever” ails you. This last testimony from a letter written to Maria Trebbin should inspire all of us to start using nettles tea regularly:

“Many thanks for your invaluable help. For 19 years I have been suffering and no physician could tell me what was wrong with me, although I consulted many. One week long I drank Nettle tea and miraculously my illness was gone, as if I had never suffered.”

References:

Dr. Christopher’s Natural Healing Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 10, October 1983

The Family Herbal by Barbara and Peter Theiss, Healing Arts Press, 1989.

Health Through God’s Pharmacy by Maria Trebbin, stories from p. 43 of 1984 printing.

Back to Eden by Jethro Kloss, 2nd Edition, 1988 printing.

Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year by Susun Weed, Ash Tree Publishing, 1986.

“When you have become acquainted with and digested the scientific facts regarding the electrochemical nature of herbs as remedial agents, you will be much better equipped to use them successfully.”

~Dr. Edward E. Shook, Advanced Treatise in Herbology