

Six Uses for Stinging Nettles

When out for a walk, who hasn't at sometime managed to sting themselves with stinging nettles. Reaching up to 7 feet high in summer, the plant is covered with stinging hairs on its leaves and stems, causing pain and discomfort, lasting anytime up to one week.

But are stinging nettles useful for any other purpose?



1 Culinary use

When cooked, stinging nettles have a flavour very similar to spinach and are rich in vitamins A, C, D, iron, potassium, manganese and calcium. Soaking the plant or cooking in water will generally remove any stinging chemicals. Very popular in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe is nettle soup, which is generally consumed in springtime and early summer. Eaten often with sliced boiled egg, the soup is made from young nettle buds available at that time of the year.

Native Americans used the plants for food in early spring when other foodstuffs were scarce. In Nepal and parts of Northern India, it is known as Shishnu and is popular cooked with local spices.

2. Medicinal Use

Stinging nettles have been used for many centuries to help treat and cure many different conditions. These include arthritis, anaemia, hay fever, kidney ailments and as a pain killer amongst many other uses. Because of its high content of vitamin K, fresh nettles have been used in folk remedies to stop bleeding. Clinical trials have proven that the juice from nettles is diuretic in patients with heart ailments and the seeds of the nettle plant were once considered to have aphrodisiac qualities.

Nettles are also used extensively in hair shampoo products to control dandruff and make hair glossier.

3. Nettle Wine

Pretty well anything can be made into wine it seems. I have not tried it personally but a recipe for its manufacture can be found at http://gardenspace.newarchaeology.com/nettle_wine.php

4. Nettle Cordial / Beer / Tea

A non alcoholic alternative to wine can be made by steeping nettle leaves in a concentrated sugar solution so the nettle flavour is taken. After a period of time, the nettles are removed and lemon juice (or other citric acid) is added to give a tart flavour and as a preservative. The resulting nettle cordial is very refreshing when mixed with sparkling water or lemonade.

It is also possible to make nettle beer which is a favourite in northern areas of Great Britain. A recipe for this is available at <http://www.selfsufficientish.com/nettlebeer.htm>

Drying nettle leaves will also remove their stinging effect and a nettle tea can be made by infusing the dried leaves.

5 Nettle dye

During both world wars, nettles were collected in great quantity to make dyes for military clothing use and for camouflage nets.

A method to make a green dye is to fill a large old saucepan to the brim with nettles and simply add water, boil for a long time and strain. This will make a good dye for wool and other fabrics.

6 Competition eating

Since 1986, in the UK, an annual stinging nettle eating championships is held in the county of Dorset. Whoever strips and eats the most raw nettles in a fixed time is the winner and the spectacle draws many thousand spectators. Apparently the trick is to roll the nettle up into a small ball and place on the back of the tongue and swallow. I don't think I will be entering the tournament any time soon somehow!

There are many supposed cures to being stung by stinging nettles. Anti-itch creams are widely available as is calamine lotion. There are many folk remedies also including rubbing with dock leaves, the underside of a fern, saliva, oil, onions and mud. However it is questionable as to whether any of them actually work.