



# **A SIMPLE GUIDE TO FORAGING**

## **THE STINGY NETTLE**

The stinging nettle is one of our most nutritious plants. This guide takes you through the steps of foraging for the stinging nettle to help you get started on this ancient path of living. You will learn where to find the plant, how to harvest it and how to prepare and conserve it

# A SIMPLE GUIDE TO FORAGING

## THE STINGY NETTLE

The stinging nettle, or *Urtica dioica*, which is its Latin name, is one of the simplest to start with. It's easy to find, easy to identify and one of the most nutritious plants we have. If you compare it to other greens like lettuce leaves, you will see that the nettle has a much higher nutritional content. In addition, it is highly medicinal and has been used in herbal medicine for centuries.

### Nutritional benefits of the stinging nettle

The nettle is rich in minerals and vitamins. The main minerals in the nettle leaves are calcium, manganese, magnesium and iron. In addition, it also has potassium, phosphorus, zinc and copper. You find Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Vitamin E, Vitamin K and many of the B Vitamins in the nettle leaves. The plant also contains the essential omega-3 fatty acids, proteins, fibres and antioxidants.

The nutritional content for each plant will vary depending on growing conditions, which time of the year you harvest it, and how you prepare the plant.

If you compare it to other readily available produce you can get in the super market or even farmers market, you will see that the nutrition value of the nettle is very high. If you compare it to for example spinach which is known to be highly nutritional, you will see that the nettle is much more nutritional.

### Comparison of 100 gram\* raw edible plant

	Stinging Nettle	Spinach
Vitamin A	200 RE**	378 RE**
Vitamin C	175 mg	37 mg
Iron	10 mg	2,1 mg
Potassium	640 mg	730 mg
Magnesium	86 mg	95 mg
Phosphorus	126 mg	45 mg
Calcium	490 mg	83 mg

\*Source: <http://www.matvaretabellen.no/>

\*\*RE: Vitamin A intake is mostly expressed in terms of retinol equivalents (RE).

## COLD CLIMATE GARDEN



*The Cold Climate Garden is an experimental permaculture garden located in Oslo, Norway.*

*I am testing out the permaculture principles to see what works and what doesn't, in a cold climate.*

*Follow me to see what's happening in the garden.*

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## The health benefits of the nettle

The nettle has many medicinal uses. It is known to have a detoxifying effect by gently cleansing the body. It's helpful for problems during menstruation and menopause. It helps the circulations in the body by increasing the production of red blood cells. The nettle stimulates kidney and gallbladder health by breaking down stones in the kidneys and gallbladder. It has anti-inflammatory agents, supports healthy bones, helps with respiratory issues, reduces blood pressure and improves skin health. Just to mention a few benefits ....

If you want more specific information on how to use the nettle as a medicinal herb, you can look it up in any herbal book. *If you are not feeling well, always go to the doctor. Never try to self-medicate without consulting your physician.*



## Where to find the stinging nettle

Originally the stinging nettle was native to northern Europe and the colder parts of the United States and Asia. Today it has spread widely and thrives in temperate climates all around the world. It is considered a weed because it grows well in many places and it spreads easily. As long as it has enough sunlight, moisture and nutrients – it thrives. Chances are, its growing not far from where you live!

One place to look for the plant is along rivers, lakes and streams, or along trails and footpaths in the woodlands. It also often appears in places where there have been previous human settlements or activity of all sorts. Look for it along old rail road tracks, in abandoned farm fields, along the edge of the wood or on empty lots. This is a perennial plant, so when you first have located it, you will find it in the same place year after year.

The stinging nettle prefers moist and rich soil, and it likes partially shady spots. It is particularly fond of soil rich in nitrogen, which we often find where humans have been. Behind the old outhouse, next to the barn almost falling down, in fields with manure left behind by the animals, where hay and other organic material is decomposing.

## Identifying the nettle

The stinging nettle is one of the easier wild plants to identify.

It grows in clusters and a mature plant will normally be around one meter high. However, in very good conditions it can grow up to two meters.

- **Stem:** The stem is almost square and covered with tiny hairs. If you break it, you will see that it is hollow in the middle. The colour range from green when the plant is young to deep purple as the plant age.
- **Leafs:** The leafs are bright to dark green in colour. They are egg shaped, broad at the base and tapering towards the tip. The edges are fine toothed and the underside covered in tiny hairs. The length of the leaves is anywhere from 3 to 15 cm. The leafs sit in pair opposite each other on the stem and square to the leaf-pair above and below it.
- **Flowers:** Where the leafs grow out of the stem the nettle will produce long hanging cluster of small green to gray flowers. Male and female flowers will be on different plants.
- **Root:** The stingy nettle has an extensive network of horizontal rhizomes in the ground. This can spread over 1.5 meters in one season. Along the rhizomes you will find fibrous roots.

If you're still not sure of your identification, one sure way to identify it is by touching. If it stings, you have the right plant!

### Similar plants that can be confused with the nettle

There are a few plants that look similar to the stingy nettle, which you could get it confused with. This list covers some of the more common plants similar to the stingy nettle. There might be other specific to your location.



Annual nettle (*Urtica urens*) – This is as the name implies, an annual plant. It is much smaller than the stingy nettle and does not grow taller than a foot. The leaves are somewhat rounder than the stingy nettles. Elsewise it looks pretty much the same though. It stings in the same way and it has more or less the same properties. You can use this plant in the same way as the stingy nettle. So no big deal if you collect this one.



False nettle (*Boehmeria cylindrical*) – This plant does not have stingy hairs. The leaves don't have as large teeth as the nettle, and they have a slightly different shape and vein structure. The flower stalks are upright with flowers clumped together, and not hanging. The leaf stems are also much longer than the nettles. This is not an edible plant.



Wood nettle (*Laportea Canadensis*) – The wood nettle looks similar to the stingy nettle and it also has stingy hairs. However, this plant has alternating leaves at the bottom of the stalks and opposite leaves further up the stalk. (The stingy nettle only has pairs of opposite leaves.) It also has small flowers above the top leaves. This plant has edible leaves that can be used much like spinach.



Nettle leaved bell flower (*Campanula trachelium*) – The leaves of this plant resembles the nettle leaves. It also has tiny hairs all over, but they do not sting. The plant has large blue bell-shaped flowers. The leaves are edible.



White dead-nettle (*Lamium album*) – The leaves are similar to the nettles, but it does not have stingy hair. It is distinguished by larger white or pink flowers. The leaves and flowers are edible.

### **How to pick the nettle**

Since the stinging nettle stings, you have to be careful when harvesting it. Make sure you wear clothes that covers your arms and legs. You will also need a pair of work gloves to handle the plant, a pair of garden scissors and a container to put the nettle in. You can pick the nettles into anything from a plastic bag to a wicker basket. It might be a good idea to choose a container of some sort that you can close, to avoid getting stung by accident after you've picked the nettle.

If you understand how the stinging process work, there is also ways to harvest the plant without gloves and without getting stung!

### **When to pick the nettle and what to pick**

Almost all parts of the nettle can be harvested. But when you are starting out foraging, the leaves are a good starting point.

You can harvest the nettle leaves as soon as the first few leaves start to appear in spring, and you can continue harvesting leaves until the nettle flowers.

You want to harvest only the young and small leaves at the top of the plant, not the large and older leaves further down the stem. Only pick the healthiest looking leaves. The stems and larger leaves are very fibrous and not good for consumption.

You can also harvest the root of the nettle. This is done either in spring or in fall. The seeds can also be harvested. This is done right before they are ripe.

When harvesting anything from the nature it is recommended to follow the Honourable Harvesting Guidelines.

1. Do you need it? Harvest with a purpose or plan in mind, not just for the fun of it.
2. Harvest only as much as you will use and process it as soon as possible (don't waste it).
3. 1 in 20 rule. It is ok to harvest a plant if there are 20 others available to maintain the population.

4. Leave Grandmother. Allow the biggest and best plants to remain so they can continue to propagate the healthiest population.
5. Leave damaged plants or plants with “residents”. Select quality material for your food and medicine. If a critter makes its home there, choose another. Harvest 1/3 or less of an individual plant (leave some roots) so it can continue to survive and thrive.
6. Harvest with a clean cut so the plant will heal well and continue to survive and thrive.
7. Avoid polluted areas.
8. Offer appreciation and bring positive energy to your harvest.
9. Never put anything in your mouth unless you are 100% sure it is safe to ingest.

### **Why does the nettle sting**

The stem and the leaf of the nettle are covered with tiny hairs. If you look closely you will see them. These hairs are hollow and contain an acidic liquid. When you touch the plant the hair pierces your skin and the tip breaks off releasing the chemicals into your skin. This will cause an annoying itch and burning sensation. You might even get a rash or small blisters.

### **What to do if you got stung by the stingy nettle**

It's no big deal if you get stung by the nettle. It will hurt for a little while, but it's no major issue. Some people might have stronger reactions than others. For some the stinging feeling goes away after an hour or so, others will feel it for a couple of days.

There are a lot of tips on how to relieve nettle stings, from putting toothpaste to mud on the stung area. Different things work for different people, so you'll have to just try what you have available if you do get stung.

My best tip would be this: If you have cold running water nearby, use that. Don't rub or scratch the stung area, just let the water run over the skin. If you are close to home and have some aloe vera gel available. Put that on after applying cold water.

To relieve the burning sensation anything that is cold will help, from cold water to smashed up black currants. The substance in the hairs on the plant that is causing the stinging feeling, is acidic. To counter that you could put on anything that is alkaline.



## How to eat the nettle when it is freshly picked

Remember to use some kitchen tongs or similar to handle the nettles in the kitchen so you don't get stung. Wash the nettles and remove any larger stems or unhealthy looking leaves.

You can use the nettles in much the same way as you would spinach, and it can be substituted for spinach in any dish. You cannot eat the nettle raw. It needs to be brought to the boiling point to remove the stinginess. After you heat the nettle it will no longer sting, and it is perfectly safe to eat.

Make sure to introduce the nettle slowly into your diet to allow the body to get used to it.



### **NETTLE TEA**

One easy way to use the nettle is to make herbal tea from it. Use one cup of nettle leaves and two cups of water. Pour into a saucepan and bring to the boiling point. Let it simmer for a few minutes. If you want the tea stronger you let it simmer longer, if you need it weaker you add more water. Pour through a strainer into serving glasses.

You can also add the cooked leaves that are left over to any soup, stew, omelette or any similar dishes.

### **NETTLE SOUP**

Another simple way to use the nettle is to make nettle soup. There are many ways to do this and you will find many different recipes. Here is one that I particularly like.

- 1 small onion
- 1 clove of garlic
- 1 large potato
- ½ litre water
- 5-7 lovage leaves
- 1 tbsp butter
- Salt, pepper

Cut onions in small pieces. Melt the butter in a saucepan and sauté the onion until soft. Finely chop the garlic and add. Peel and dice the potato, add to the saucepan. Stir for a few moments and add water. Tear the lovage leaves into the pot and add salt and pepper. If you don't have lovage leaves you can use stock instead of water. Bring to a boil and boil for ten minutes or until the potatoes are tender. Remove from the oven and let it cool down a bit. Use a liquidizer or blender to smoothen the soup. Bring it back to the heat and warm up to the boiling point again. Serve with a dash of cream and a hardboiled egg.



### **NETTLE PESTO**

You can also make pesto with nettles and use it like a standard pesto. You will need a large cup of nettle leaves. Bring a saucepan of water to the boil and pop the nettles in. Let them cook for a

minute. Then place them in cold water quickly and let them run off in a colander afterwards. Put all ingredients in a mixer and blend well.

- ½ dl cold pressed oil
- 75 gram parmesan cheese
- 5 tbsp pine nuts
- ½ garlic clove
- Salt and pepper to taste

### How to conserve the nettle for later use

There are several ways you can conserve the nettle so you can use it also when it is not in season.

One simple way is to dry it. Hang it upside down in small bouquets and let it dry out. Select a shaded but warm place to hang it. Or you can use a dehydrator if you have one, or drying it in the baking oven is also possible.

Once it is dry you can crumble the leaves into a powder and store in air tight containers in a dark and cool place. This powder can then be added to just about everything you cook or bake. Add it to your flour and make nettle bread or nettle pancakes. Add it to your soups, stews, scrambled eggs and green smoothies.

You can also blanch the nettle and then freeze it in portion sizes for later use. Bring a saucepan of water to the boil and boil the nettles for a minutes. Scope out and dip in cold water before you let it run off in a colander. You can then place the blanched nettles in for example cupcake forms and store in the freezer. Then you just defrost as needed.

So, there you have it! Now you are ready to go out and forage for some nettles. Here are some photos from the Cold Climate Garden.



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A collection of plastic-free kitchenware including stainless steel pots, pans, and a colander.

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