

Words and Deeds

National Nettle Week (15th-26th May 2013)

The stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) – friend or foe? If you've been stung by one – or more – you will probably opt for the latter definition; however, for centuries, nettles have been our friends – providing a source of food and medicine for us and for the wildlife in our gardens. Nettles gathered in spring are richest in nutrients.

Food: use young shoots in nettle soup or in other dishes in place of spinach. The plant is full of calcium, magnesium, iron, and vitamins. Even the top chefs use nettles – and nettle tea is common in shops, alongside peppermint and other varieties.

Medicine: In the past, Native Americans used nettles to reduce aches and pains; and Europeans used them to treat arthritis (the sting draws more blood to the affected area, relieving pain). Once dried to neutralise the acid (which is what causes the stinging sensation), juice from nettle stems and leaves is a powerful anti-histamine (which is ironic, really, when you think about it – and homeopathic: the notion of treating 'like with like') and anti-asthmatic. These oft-called 'folk' remedies, which fell out of use and were even scorned in the 20th century, are now once again of interest, being explored by medical science – further proof that granny did indeed know best.

Gardens: blue tits and great tits love to eat the aphids which shelter in the nettle patch; ladybirds, and Comma, Peacock, Red Admiral and small Tortoiseshell butterflies lay their eggs on the plants; and, later in the year, nettles provide food for seed-eating birds. Your plants and vegetables will benefit from home-made nettle fertiliser, which is nutritious, deters pests and prevents fungal disease.

If you want to get involved in Nettle Week:

- Create a nettle patch in your garden or on your allotment. As nettles spread rapidly, it may be wise to treat them like mint and sow the seeds or plant the seedlings in a large container to contain their thuggish ways! They are perennials, so, again like mint, they will keep coming back – with very little encouragement.
- Then you can make nettle fertiliser to feed your plants, Lady Ridley's nettle soup to feed yourself, or a nice nettle and elderflower tea, for the hayfever sufferer in your life.

Nettle fertiliser

(from www.nettles.org.uk)

- Carefully gather and crush/bruise a bunch of nettles
- Put them into a container and add enough water to cover them
- Weigh them down – try using a brick
- Cover the container

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- Check the brew after about three weeks – holding your breath, as the mixture is pungent (just like comfrey fertiliser, which can also be made in this way)
- Dilute it (1 part brew to 10 parts water) and use on your plants
- Repeat as required

Lady Ridley's nettle soup (serves around 2-3 people)

(from www.nettles.org.uk)

- 1lb potatoes
- ½lb young nettles
- 2oz butter
- 1½ pints vegetable stock
- Sea salt and black pepper
- 4 tbsps sour cream

Cook the peeled, chopped potatoes for 10 minutes and then drain them.

Wash and coarsely chop the nettles.

Melt the butter in a saucepan and add the nettles. Stew gently for a few minutes then add the potatoes and heated stock. Bring to the boil then simmer for 10 minutes

Put the mixture in a blender and purée with the seasoning and sour cream.

Serve with crusty bread.

Nettle and elderflower tea for hayfever sufferers

(from www.cheshireherbsandherbalmedicine.weebly.com)

Put one teaspoon of dried elderflowers and nettles into a cup of boiling water, cover and let it steep for a few minutes.

Drink when cooled; can be made and consumed up to three times a day

Research has found that nettles soothe mucous membranes (Mittman, 1990) and have anti-inflammatory and anti-histamine properties (Roscheck et al., 2009).

**Herbs can interact with other drugs and may be contra-indicated if you have certain medical conditions, are pregnant or lactating. Either buy nettle and elderflower tea from shops or be careful what you pick – use young, fresh shoots, etc, from high up the plants (to avoid contamination from animals) and from plants growing away from roads.*

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Most of the information in this article is from www.nettles.org.uk – a CONE initiative; information can also be found at www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk.

For more information, please contact Ms Debra Williams:

Email: debra@wordsanddeeds.co.uk Telephone: 07783 997129

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Stinging Nettles (photograph from Wikipedia)



Nettle Soup (photograph from www.justcookit.blogspot.com)



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