



# Stinging Nettle

## A Golden Oldie

Kahlee Keane

**The healing history  
of this multipurpose herb  
dates back  
thousands of years.**

**M**asan was once golden with shimmering leaves and a bright aura. The human beings did not pay their respect to this plant medicine, taking it for granted, passing it by without offering tobacco. In time it turned colour to blend in with the other plants and grew stinging hairs to catch the human beings by surprise and sting them. That made us pay respect.”

This legend was passed on to me by a Cree elder from Northern Manitoba, where stinging nettle is called *Masan* (one who itches).

Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) takes its English name from the old Anglo-

Saxon word *noedl*, meaning “needle.” *Urtica* is from the Latin *urere*, meaning “to burn.” Despite its “burning needles,” nettle has been used for centuries as food, and medicine, as well as in industry, where it has been woven into cloth, rope and nets.

Every vegetable garden deserves a healthy patch of nettles. Rudolph Steiner, scientist and mystic, advocated biodynamic sprays made from nettle to increase vegetative growth, particularly in dry weather (it also makes an excellent aphid spray). Biodynamic gardening uses “companion planting” of nettles to increase the volatile oils in such plants as valerian,

mint, sage and rosemary. You will find the potency of many plants increases measurably when planted near nettles.

You can grow nettles from seeds gathered from wild stands. Once started, they spread rapidly from their shallow rhizomes. The rather succulent, strongly angular stems may grow to be more than two metres (six feet) tall. Mostly, they are unbranched with opposite leaves that have long stalks and equally long egg-shaped to lance-shaped blades with very prominent veins.

The stem, leaf stalks and larger veins on the surface of the leaves have multicellular stinging hairs that function like

## Stinging Nettle Through the Ages

•4000 BC: Native North Americans used nettle tea as an aid in pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. Native healers used to strike the limbs of paralyzed patients with branches of stinging nettle to stimulate muscles.

4000 BC

•400 BC: Nettle juice was used in Hippocrates' time to treat bites and stings.

400 BC

•AD 70: The Greek physician Dioscorides listed a range of uses for nettle—the fresh chopped leaves as a plaster for septic wounds, the juice for nosebleeds and the cooked leaves mixed with myrrh to stimulate menstruation.

AD 70

•1000–1400: During medieval times, diuretics and remedies for joint problems were made from stinging nettle. The fibres of the stalks were used to make cloth and to dye wool and cottons.

AD 1000

hypodermic needles. The toxic materials, a combination of acid and antigenic protein, are under pressure; when the needle penetrates the skin, the tip breaks and the juice is injected. It stings, but new research supports the folklore that this liquid is an antidote for arthritis.

You really can't take too much nettle. As a spring tonic, it's famous throughout the western world. Not only are the steamed greens tasty, but they contain secretin, a substance that assists in the removal of heavy mucus buildup. Tea from the dried leaves is a year-round blood builder.

Nettle leaf is high in organic iron, chlorophyll, potassium, calcium, magnesium, silicic, folic and pantothenic acids and vitamins A, B1, B2, C and K. This highly nutritive content is helpful in correcting anemia as well as leg and uterine cramps. The vitamin K prevents postpartum hemorrhage and bleeding. The red blood cells and liver are nourished by long-term use of this herb.

According to Robert Rogers, botanist and longtime herbalist, freeze-dried nettle leaf contains large quantities of histamine and formic acid, which are valuable in treating allergic rhinitis. Interestingly, nettle leaf somehow binds up *immunoglobulin G* (the body's most abundant antibody), but only in the freeze-dried form.

Nettle root extracts have a demonstrated effect on human prostate tissue, proving to be effective for treatment of benign prostatic hyperplasia. A number of clinical studies support this claim. A chemical constituent of the root has an effect on the amount of free (active) testosterone circulating in the blood, or may inhibit one of the key enzymes, aromatase, responsible for testosterone synthesis. These active principles are water soluble, so the root may be easily be taken as a boiled tea (decoction).

Whether you treat yourself to a spring feast of nutritive nettle greens or use the leaf, root or seed medicinally long term, I think you'll agree that nettle deserves to feel golden again. ■

*Kahlee Keane, Root Woman is a Saskatchewan eco-herbalist and educator with a deep interest in the protection of wild plants. Contact her through her Web site <connect.to/root-woman>.*

**Wild Plant:** Stinging nettle (*Urtica spp.*)

**Family:** Nettle Family (*Urticaceae*)

**Description:** Deeply toothed, dark green leaves grow opposite on a four-sided stem of this native perennial. Small green flowers hang in clusters from leaf axils. Stinging hairs are found on leaf and stem.

**Habitat:** Moist waste areas such as ditches, abandoned buildings, garden edges and compost heaps.

**Part Used:** Leaf, root and seed.

**Ethical Wildcrafting:** Leaves are harvested before the flowers develop. To harvest, cut the whole stem leaving five centimetres (two inches) or so above soil line, being careful not to disturb the shallow root system. The roots are harvested in the fall of the second year. The seeds are harvested when ripe.

**Physiological Action:** *Alterative* (enhances the process of nutrition; repairs bodily tissues and promotes healthy changes in the organism). *Diuretic* (stimulates urination specifically aiding the elimination of uric acid). *Lymphagogue* (stimulates activity of the lymph system). *Nutritive* (nourishes and sustains life). Tonic (nourishes and tones the tissues, specifically those of the urinary system).

**Focus:** This highly nutritive herb makes a spring tonic that has no equal. The irritating hairs are neutralized when cooked or dried. The dried leaves, gathered before the flowers appear, remain viable and potent through to the next growing season.

**Note:** Sharp pointed hairs on stem and leaf have a bulbous base filled with irritating fluid. These hairs break when they penetrate the skin, releasing, among other chemicals, formic acid. Wear gloves and long-sleeve shirts to gather.



•1200 BC: Nettles were found in herbal gardens in Egypt around the time of King Rameses II.

AD 1200

•1640: British herbalist Nicholas Culpeper noted that nettle eases pain, coughs and shortness of breath, expels phlegm and stones, reduces inflammation of the mouth and throat, kills parasites and acts as a diuretic.

AD 1640

•1500–1800: Nettle fibres were used in Scotland for weaving coarse household linens. Its yarn was used to make fishing nets. European herbalists recommended nettle tea for lung disorders. The herb makes a nice botanic beer that, besides tasting good, is a remedy for gout and rheumatism.

AD 1800

•1900: When Germany and Austria ran out of cotton during the First World War, they turned to nettles to make their uniforms. Nettles were also mixed with fodder to feed horses and give them a beautiful coat.

AD 1900