

# In Praise of Nettles

Permaculture teaches us to use multi-purpose plants in preference to single-purpose plants. Nettle is a great example of a multi-purpose plant. Nettles are used for food, medicine, fiber, cosmetics and fertilizer.

**Food:** Nettle greens are one of the choicest spring pot-herbs. The top 4 inches of the shoots are lightly steamed so the stinging hairs are rendered harmless. They are an awesomely nutritious food rich in vitamins A and C and minerals with very high levels of iron, which makes it a great dietary item for anemic people in general and menstruating women in particular. The tops are only harvested when young (before flowering commences). Later on in the season after the plants have flowered, the developing seed heads can be eaten raw or processed. These dangling catkin-like affairs are composed of long strings of tiny green balls. The best time to harvest them is when the little seed balls are plump and still green in color. These unripe seed-heads (as well as the greens) are an excellent food for people who suffer from asthma or allergies. They are especially effective if eaten regularly early in the hay fever season. Uncooked nettle juice may be one of the wonder foods of all time. Nettles can be juiced, dried and processed into many products. Nettles are also processed for chlorophyll to use as a coloring agent in foods and medicines.

**Medicine:** Deni Bown in *Encyclopedia of Herbs & Their Uses* states of the medicinal uses of nettle: "Internally for anemia, hemorrhage (especially of the uterus), excessive menstruation, hemorrhoids, arthritis, rheumatism, gout, and skin complaints (especially eczema). Externally for arthritic pain, gout, sciatica, neuralgia, hemorrhoids, scalp and hair problems, burns, insect bites, and nosebleed". Nettle roots are used for treating urinary incontinence and swollen prostate.

**Cosmetics:** Nettles are used in hair rinses, conditioners, shampoos and hair care products.

**Fiber:** Nettles were used by Northwest native peoples for making twines and other fiber products. Nettles have been processed and the fiber made into cloth in many cultures around the world. Nettle cloth is still made in Nepal. With the increasing interest in natural fibers, a small nettle fiber farm might be viable.

**Fertilizer.** Nettle is one of the main plants used in bio-dynamic agriculture and is an excellent addition to compost. Nettle tea is a fertilizer made by fermenting nettles in water and then applied to crops. By-products left over from nettle processing can be used for fertilizer and soil amendments.

## Nettle subspecies and varieties

Hitchcock and Croquist in *Flora of the Northwest* list eight kinds of nettles found growing wild in the Northwest. Two are non-native and six are native. One of the species is *Urtica urens*, dwarf nettle. Dwarf nettle is a small, taprooted annual which is naturalized from Europe but is not common here.

*Urtica dioica* is a widespread perennial species found across Eurasia and North America. It has many subspecies (ssp.) and each subspecies can be further divided into a number of varieties (var.). The situation in the Northwest is that our native *Urtica dioica* is ssp. *gracilis*, which is further subdivided into 6 varieties: var. *procera*, var. *angustifolia*, var. *californica*, var. *lyallii*, var. *gracilis* and var. *holosericea* (a particularly robust and strongly pubescent variety found in eastern Washington and Idaho). Some taxonomists give these varieties status as distinct species. To add to the confusion, the non-native European nettle *U. dioica* ssp. *dioica* has widely naturalized in the Northwest and is the species most often encountered west of the Cascades.

Which one of these nettle subspecies or varieties are you collecting and cooking up in your neighborhood? This subject of exact identification is important to someone thinking of putting in a commercial planting. Which of these varieties will give you the best product? This is a function of several factors: 1) Which species will perform best on your site's soils and microclimates? Is one more adapted than another? 2) Which type is the best for the product(s) you seek? Taller varieties are better if you are looking for fiber. Medicinal compounds may vary from one variety to the next. Has anyone done comparative testing on Northwest varieties? 3) Some varieties may have characteristics that make them easier to manage, harvest or process compared to others.

**Companion planting.** Nettles can grow in full sun to partial shade. They can be grown under a light overstory of timber trees or other tree crops. The highest production levels would be in full sun. They grow well on the woodland edge and like to grow with elderberry and fruit trees. Nettles can be propagated by seeds or by dividing the long rhizomatous roots.

Nettle is just one of hundreds of useful native plants. Every plant needs its club of enthusiasts. I am definitely a nettle enthusiast so if you are interested in putting in a commercial planting drop me a line.