

Stinging Nettle

URTICA DIOICA



HABITAT

Wasteland, neglected corners of fields and gardens, woods and hedgerows.

PARTS USED

Leaves and young stems.

Nettles have a long and varied history in food and medicine. In 1661 London diarist Samuel Pepys mentions enjoying nettle pudding. Some sources suggest that the Romans brought stinging nettles with them to Britain's shores to keep themselves warm by stinging the skin. Ouch! There seem to be varying interpretations as to where the word 'nettle' derives. One theory says that it is from 'naedl' an Anglo-Saxon word for needle, another that it comes from an old word meaning to twist. The generic *Urtica* comes from the Latin for 'I burn', *uro*. And no, that has nothing to do with a currency with a similar sounding name.

Long stems of older plants produce a fibre which has been used since the Bronze Age for making cloth or sacking. It is a good alternative to flax and the author remembers reading somewhere that towards the end of World War One the cloth used to make shirts for German soldiers contained large amounts of nettle fibre. And only recently fashion designers have again been experimenting with nettle fabrics.

Technically the plant belongs to the Urticaceae or Nettle family. It is dioecious [having male and female flowers on different plants], a perennial, grows from 30-180 cm tall, flowers from May to September, has creeping roots, pointed, deeply serrated, and opposite oval leaves, and usually likes soils rich in nitrogen and potassium.

Nettles contain vitamins A and C, and a variety of minerals. Constituents include histamine - a protective substance naturally occurring in the body, and perhaps one reason why nettle juice can relieve its stings and the plant is used in treating eczema. However, repeated stinging can cause a recurrent rash [*a good reason to wear gloves when harvesting nettles for consumption*], while potential contra-indications exist from the plant being diuretic, the older leaves laxative, and an indication that blood pressure and sugar may be lowered. For these reasons readers with a medical condition should probably therefore seek expert medical advice before eating nettles.

[Taken from 'The *Essential* Nettle, Dandelion, Thistle & Chickweed Cookbook' by Johnny Jumbalaya.]

Consumption of wild plants is at the reader's discretion and own risk. For personal safety do not eat wild plants if you have a medical condition, during pregnancy, or feed to minors.

WHEN TRYING ONE OF THE WILD PLANTS LISTED FOR THE FIRST TIME, TRY TASTING JUST A SMALL AMOUNT OF THE PREPARED PLANT TO CHECK YOUR TOLERANCE. IF YOU HAVE ANY BAD OR ALLERGIC REACTIONS AVOID ANY FURTHER CONSUMPTION. NEVER PUT ANY PLANT INTO YOUR MOUTH UNLESS ABSOLUTELY 100% CERTAIN OF ITS IDENTIFICATION AND EDIBILITY.

NETTLE ALOO

Nettles	1-2 garlic cloves
Potatoes	1 tsp. ground coriander and paprika
Water	Pinches of ground cardamom seed &
Butter or oil	cayenne
Mustard seeds	Ground black pepper
1 large onion - sliced	Salt

Sag Aloo is one of those wonderful Indian side dishes and this version uses the spinach-like common nettle as a replacement. Roll on nettle aloo...

- Cut the potatoes into 1-inch sized pieces and place into a pot with the nettle leaves.
- Cover with some warm water, bring to a rapid boil then simmer for 10-12 minutes, or until the potato pieces are tender.
- In another pan heat butter or oil and cook the mustard seeds until they start to pop.
- Add onion sliced lengthways and garlic, and sauté till softened, then add the spices.
- Stir around then remove from the heat to add the drained potato and nettles.
- Stir everything together gently so the potatoes don't disintegrate, and add any seasoning at this stage.
- Continue simmering gently until the whole mass has lost more water.

VARIATIONS

There are other wild ingredients that might make for interesting variations on this recipe. Some of the larger rootstocks for example, and perhaps leaves like borage, rosebay willowherb, ground-elder [pre-cooked to remove the bitter edge], or elder flowers. Chickweed comes to mind too, although it is so delicate that you would have to add it later in the cooking process to prevent it becoming a green sludge.

[Recipe extract from 'The *Really* Wild Food Guide'.]

NETTLE & SMOKED FISH SAUCE

1 small onion - chopped
Butter or oil [oil preferred]
2-3 cups nettles - young
1 cup water
1 tbsp. peanut butter [coarse / unsweetened]
Cayenne pepper - pinch
Smoked fish - cooked and flaked

- In a pan fry the onion until softened then add the cayenne, nettle leaves, plus the peanut butter mixed with about a ½ cup of water.
- Mix together then cover and cook for about 5 minutes at a moderate heat.
- Stir from time to time to prevent sticking.
- Add flaked fish on top of the mixture and the rest of the water.
- Cover again and simmer for another 5 minutes.
- Serve with potatoes or rice.

[Recipe extract from 'The *Essential* Nettle, Dandelion, Thistle & Chickweed Cookbook'.]

Copyright ©2003, 2007

Other Wild Food Cookbooks available :

The *Essential* Nettle, Dandelion, Thistle & Chickweed Cookbook [pub. 2003] - ISBN 0 9544158 1 7
The *Essential* Hedgerow and Wayside Cookbook [pub. 2003] - ISBN 0 9544158 2 5
***Essential* Survival Greens** [pub. 2005] - ISBN 0 9544158 5 X

Available for purchase online via the official support website: www.countrylovers.co.uk/wildfoodjj
WILD FOOD SCHOOL website at: www.countrylovers.co.uk/wfs