

# Nettle

*Nettles are valued as food, medicine and fiber. In springtime, the young shoots are cooked as a vegetable. A restorative and energizing tea is made from the leaves. Nettles are also used to make dye with shades ranging from yellow to deep green. The fibrous stalk is made into strong cordage for nets and rope.*



**Other names:** *Urtica dioica*, Stinging Nettle

Whulshootseed: tɬʷəlʃucid: sčədʔx̩

**Identifying nettle:** Stinging nettle is a native perennial herb with opposite deep green leaves with serrated edges and tiny greenish flowers. Stems are square. Plants grow 3-7 feet tall and the stalk and underside of leaves are covered with stinging hairs that rise from a gland containing formic acid.

**Where it grows:** Look for patches of nettle in streambeds, forests, farmlands and disturbed areas with rich wet soil throughout the Pacific Northwest. It grows from low elevations up into lowland mountains. Do not gather nettles in agricultural or industrial areas because they may absorb inorganic nitrites and heavy metals.

**Season:** Food: February-April when they are young and tender (between four and 10 inches tall). Older nettle leaves become tough and the stalks get fibrous. Nettles may re-sprout in fall when the days are the same length as spring and can be harvested again. Tea or seasoning: early through late spring before they flower. Cordage: late summer to early fall.

**Harvesting and Processing Nettles:** Nettles do sting, but harvesting is easy and pain free with the right tools. You need either gloves or scissors and a basket or bag. When you cut or pinch the stock, leave a few leaves at the base of the plant so it can continue to grow. Use ethical harvesting practices by taking only enough so that the nettle patch can continue to thrive. It is important to harvest nettles and other plants away from roads, agricultural spray or industrial sites because they can absorb harmful minerals and pollutants from the soil. If you do get a nettle sting, place a poultice of plantain or yellow dock, or rub the spores of sword fern over the area to ease irritation.



To preserve nettle leaves for tea or seasoning, gather on a dry day and choose plants that are clean since you will not be rinsing them (wet plants do not generally dry well). Cut the stock where the leaves are bright and healthy looking. Pick up the plants with scissors or gloved hands and place them in a large bag or basket. Bundle four to six stalks with a rubber band and hang them upside down in a dark dry place, or place them in a paper bag and rotate them every few days until dry. Once nettles are

completely dry and crunchy, use gloves and run your pinched fingers up the stem to strip the leaves. Store leaves whole or slightly crumbled in a dry place like a glass jar or a plastic bag out of direct sunlight.

To harvest nettle for cordage, cut the longest stalks in late summer through early fall when they are fully-grown and still strong. Strip the leaves off the stalk with gloved hands. By rubbing the stems, you can remove the stinging hairs. Bundle and dry in a well-ventilated area.



**Eating Nettles:** Nettles are called a “super food” because of their chlorophyll, vitamin, mineral, protein and amino acid content. Just eating nettles once or twice a week can add a significant amount of nutrients to your diet that will help to give you energy and strength. The whole young plant can be eaten, stems and all. Larger stems will get fibrous and should be removed. Rinse nettles in a colander before cooking. Methods for preparing nettles include:

- Boiling – boil nettles for 3-5 minutes. They can be eaten straight, added to dishes or frozen for later use. The water nettles are boiled in can then be drunk as a tea.
- Canning – follow general instructions for canning spinach.
- Freezing – either steam or boil nettles until just cooked, rinse in cold water, let drain and place in freezer bags for later use. You can prepare many batches in the same pot. Save the water for tea or to use as a soup base.
- Sautéing – Sauté until they look fully cooked, usually about 5-8 minutes.
- Steaming – place nettles in a colander and steam for 5-10 minutes.

The stinging substance in nettles (formic acid) is neutralized with heat and once it is dried. Cooked nettles can be eaten straight as a vegetable or added to quiches, casseroles, meat pies, egg scrambles, meat loaf, lasagna, etc. Dried nettles are used as a culinary seasoning and are a delicious addition to chicken soup, clam chowder and tomato sauce.

**Nettle Medicine:** Skokomish elder Bruce Miller taught that nettles are an important traditional spring food and medicine. After wintertime when Salish people traditionally ate more dried foods and less fresh plants, nettles were a source of powerful nutrients and cleansing medicine that helped people to enter the new season with vitality.

Nettles can help bring the body back to a state of balance. If someone is feeling debilitated or generally worn down, nettles are often recommended. They assist the kidneys in eliminating excess fluid, balance blood pH, and filter waste from the body including uric acid. They also support liver function, which includes breaking down waste products, digesting fats,



storing minerals and building healthy blood and building blocks for rebuilding our body. Nettles are a traditional remedy for arthritis, gout, eczema and skin rashes. Many people find that nettles help to alleviate allergies.

Both in the Pacific Northwest and in Europe, people have intentionally stung themselves with nettles for many reasons including to stay awake and alert during battle or hunting, and to ease the pain of injured or arthritic joints. Some native elders even soak their joints

in cold water after stinging themselves. This makes good physiological sense. Compounds including histamine, acetylcholine and formic acid on nettles touch our skin and cause an awakening of cellular responses, lymph flow and nerve and capillary stimulation. Cold water reduces swelling and helps to remove stagnant blood from the joint, thereby easing pain and speeding healing. If you get stung unintentionally, you can make a poultice from plantain leaf, yellow dock or the underside of sword fern to heal more quickly. Nettle tea is also used as a hair rinse to make the hair glossy and stimulate growth.

**Traditional Technologies:** Nettle leaves and roots are used to make dye with shades ranging from yellow to deep green. The fiber makes strong cordage and has been used for making rope, fishing line and nets. Two thousand-year-old nettle clothing was found in China that still remains intact.

**Ecological relationships:** Nettles grow in patches and will help to build fertile topsoil. When their leaves die back each autumn, they create mineral-rich compost that helps trees and other plants to thrive. Many insects and other forest creatures eat nettles, but they have done an excellent job of protecting themselves with their sting.

**Growing tips:** Nettles can be easily transplanted if you get a good portion of the root and soil from where it grows. Choose a planting spot with a similar amount of sun and soil moisture that is not a hazard for young children. They will thrive and spread in wet areas with rich soil. You may want to make a sign where you plant nettle that says something like “Be aware. Stinging nettles are growing here!”

**Additional Resources:**

Video on how to harvest and prepare nettles:

<https://vimeo.com/108420031>



# How Nettles Saved the People

as told by Roger Fernandes of the Lower Elwha Tribe.

<https://vimeo.com/90379255>)



*A long time ago, the First People of this land were always afraid. They were always frightened, and they hid in the shadows of the forests all the time. They were always looking behind themselves.*

*The thing they were afraid of, the thing they feared the most, was those big canoes that would come from the North filled with raiders, warriors from the Northern tribes. They would come from the North in surprise attacks, they would attack our villages and they would rob, they would hurt people, and they would kidnap them and take them to the North to be slaves. They would burn down villages. These people would come without warning, and without mercy, they would attack our villages.*

*There was a man in the village and he saw this, his people frightened, living lives of fear. He said, "This is not right, my people should not live lives of fear." So that night, he prayed before he went to sleep. He prayed to the spirits, he prayed to his ancestors for some kind of guidance to help his people.*

*While the man slept, he had a dream and a plant came to him. It was the Nettle plant. Nettle spoke to him and said, "When I am growing in the spring time, I want you to have your people gather my leaves and dry them, then make them into a tea. I want all of your people to drink that tea together. And as you all drink that tea, I want the people to say in one voice 'I will be strong for my ancestors, I will be strong for my people, I will be strong for the ones to come.'*

*The man woke up and told his people his dream, and the people followed the dream. They gathered the Nettle leaves, dried them, made it into a tea, and drank that tea together as they said those words: 'I will be strong for my people, I will be strong for my ancestors, I will be strong for the ones to come.' And the people felt a little stronger.*

*The man had another dream sometime later. Nettle came back to him and said, "I want your strongest men and women warriors to gather my whole body: my stalk, my branches, my leaves and I want them to whip themselves with me, to flog themselves with me, and as they feel my power enter their body, I want them to say the same words: 'I will be strong for my ancestors, I will be strong for my people, I will be strong for the ones to come.'*

*The man explained his dream again and the people followed the directions. The strongest men and women warriors gathered the plant and flogged themselves with, and as they felt the power enter their body as they said those words. And so the people felt stronger.*

*One day, word arrived that the canoes were coming from the North, big canoes filled with raiders and warriors! But instead of running away to hide in the forests or going to the mountains as the people had done before, they stood together, the whole village, and they formed one long line. And that one long line of people walked down to the beach - men, women, children, elders, everyone walked down in*



*one long line to the beach. They stood together in one long line, shoulder to shoulder, looking out to the salt water. As those canoes approached, they came within view; the people began to sing a warrior song in one voice. The men in the canoes heard the people singing that song in one voice and they saw the people standing together. And those men in the canoes realized that the people could not be defeated, so they turned their canoes around and went back to the North, leaving our villages safe, leaving our people safe. And that is how Nettle saved the people.*



*Artwork by Roger Fernandes*

# Nettle Nutrients

Nettles are much higher in nutrients than other store bought greens like lettuce and spinach. Minerals are vital to bone strength along with balanced blood composition. Plants are excellent sources of minerals because they draw them from the soil and concentrate them in their own tissue. If the soil is depleted of minerals, plants will suffer through weak structure and a decreased resistance to disease. This is why wild plants are often higher in minerals compared to vegetables that are grown on farmland with depleted soil.

Minerals are categorized into two categories – major minerals and trace minerals. We use a larger amount of major minerals, although trace minerals are essential for health too. Major minerals include calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, potassium, sulfur, sodium and chloride. Trace Minerals include zinc, iron, manganese, copper, boron, silicon, molybdenum, vanadium, chromium, selenium and iodine.

- Calcium is the most abundant mineral in our body, comprising as much as 2% of our total body weight. Calcium is needed for bone formation, muscle contraction, heartbeat regulation and blood clotting, just to name a few. Low calcium levels can lead to muscle spasms, leg cramps, high blood pressure and osteoporosis.
- Magnesium activates many enzymes and maintains the electrical charge of cells, especially nerves and muscles. People with magnesium deficiency may have symptoms including mental confusion, irritability, weakness, heart disturbances, muscles cramps, headaches, insomnia and a predisposition to stress. Nettles are over 8 times higher in magnesium than spinach and 22 times higher than kale!

	RDA	Spinach	Kale	Nettle
Calcium	800	102	206	2900
Magnesium	300	96.8	37.4	860
Iron	18	2.96	1.8	41.8
Potassium	1875-5225	518	244	1750
Vitamin A	4,000 IU	8,920 IU	9,130 IU	15,700 IU
Vitamin C	60	56	102	83
Thiamine	1	.116	.11	.54
Riboflavin	1.2	.22	.2	.43
Niacin	13	.6	1.8	5.2
Chromium	.05-.20			3.9
Cobalt				13.2
Phosphorus	800			447
Zinc	15	.618	.78	4.7
Manganese	2.5-5	96.8	37.4	860
Selenium	.05-.2			2.2
Sodium	1100-3300	98	47	4.9
Protein	3.6%	5%	10.2%	16.5%

Numbers indicate milligrams per 100 grams (about 1 cup). Compiled by Rose Barlow based on USDA research in “The Composition of Foods” and “Nutritional Herbology.”

## Basic Nettle Sauté

*This is a standby in our house because it is quick, easy and delicious. You can easily modify it to your taste by adding different spices or toppings. Chard, kale or dandelion greens also work well in this recipe.*

- 1 small bag of nettle
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar or lemon juice
- Salt and pepper to taste
- \*Optional – ½ cup feta cheese



Gather fresh greens, wash and chop into small pieces with scissors. In a medium-sized sauté pan with a lid, sauté onions and garlic in olive oil until onions are translucent. Add nettles and vinegar or lemon juice. Cover for a couple of minutes then stir. Sauté until greens are tender – about 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with fresh feta and serve.

## Spring Nettle Soup

*This savory spring soup will leave you feeling deeply nourished. Corn adds a natural sweetness while potatoes are filling and the nettle adds a rich broth flavor.*

- 1 grocery bag full of fresh nettles
- 3 tablespoons olive oil or butter
- 2 large onions, diced
- 2 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 8-10 cups water
- 4 potatoes, peeled and diced
- 2 cups corn, fresh or frozen
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Salt and pepper to taste.



Wash nettles, cut finely with scissors and set aside. In a large soup pot sauté onions and garlic in olive oil for 3-5 minutes. Add water, potatoes, corn and nettles then bring to a boil. Simmer until potatoes are tender, about 10 minutes. Blend all or part of the ingredients in a blender or a food processor (optional). Add lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste.

## Nettle Pesto

*Try tossing this with pasta, potatoes or cooked vegetables. It can also be used on crackers or fresh vegetables as a snack.*

1 small bag of fresh young nettles, rinsed  
1 bunch basil, stems removed, washed and drained  
½ cup Parmesan or Romano cheese, grated  
1/3-cup walnuts or pine nuts  
1/3 cup of extra virgin olive oil  
1 clove garlic, chopped  
1 teaspoon lemon juice  
Salt and pepper to taste



Boil nettles in water (blanch) for 2-3 minutes to remove the sting. Drain, let cool and roughly chop. Place all ingredients in a food processor or blender. Blend until smooth. Add salt and pepper to taste. Place the pesto in a clean jar and pour a little extra olive oil over the top. Cover with a lid. This will keep for 2-3 weeks in the refrigerator.

## Nettle Mint Tea

*Mix equal parts dried nettle leaf and peppermint*

This refreshing and energizing tea is high in minerals that build strong bones, hair and nails. Nettles help with detoxification & allergies. Mint eases upset stomach and congestion. Use 1 tablespoon per cup, steep 20 minutes to several hours. Drink 1-3 cups a day.

## Healthy Bones, Hair and Nails Tea

*Mix equal parts nettle, horsetail, red clover and mint.*

These herbs are high in minerals that build strong connective tissue. It is a favorite tea for menopausal women who are at risk for osteoporosis. Steep 20 minutes to several hours.





# Making Nettle Cordage

Nettle fiber is renowned for its durability and has been used for making fishnets, ropes, clothing, and even bed linens. Fully-grown nettle stems are gathered for fiber in summer to early fall.

Remember to wear gloves and cut stems at the base and strip the leaves and small branches from the main stem.

If you are working with fresh nettles, split the stems in half, cutting length-wise with a sharp knife. Take a rolling pin or round stick to flatten the half-stems. You can even beat them with a stick or a flat rock to help separate the outer fiber from the inner woody stem. Carefully separate the outer fibers, trying to keep them long. Let these fibers dry in a basket or a paper bag before creating cordage because they will shrink considerably.

If you are working with dry nettles, you can soak them to make them easier to work with. Continue as above by splitting the stems, flattening them and carefully removing the fiber. The fiber can then be braided or twisted and made into strong cordage.



To make cordage, start in the middle of a long bunch of fiber. Twist the fiber tightly so it begins to buckle in the middle. Use this to start two strands that you will twist together. Either have someone hold tip of the cordage while you twist the strands or place the top of the cordage in your mouth to stabilize it. Keep twisting both strands in the same direction so that they naturally wrap around each other. You can make a bracelet by using one end of the cordage as a loop and tying a knot in the other end at the distance that wraps around your wrist.

To make long cordage, once you get about three inches from the end of your fiber strand, you will need to splice in new fiber to make your cordage longer. Split open the fibers of both strands and interweave and twist them together. Continue twisting the strands together. More fiber can be continuously added to the cordage to make long rope. You can practice making cordage by using raffia or twine.



*Nettle cordage and net photos from Able Lloyd*

## **Additional Resources:**

See Youtube videos on making nettle cordage



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**Photo credits:**

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