STINGING NETTLE NOTEBOOK

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About The Author

Robin Harford is a professional forager, ethnobotanical researcher, wild food educator and sensory botanist.

He gathers wild edible plants on a daily basis, and is the creator of the UK’s leading wild food site eatweeds.co.uk, which is listed in The Times Top 50 websites for food and drink.

Robin has been writing, filming, publishing and teaching people about their local edible landscape since 2008. Recently his foraging courses were voted #1 in the country by BBC Countryfile.

He is also a co-director of Plants & Healers International, a non-profit that connects people, plants and healers around the world.

He travels extensively documenting and recording the traditional and local uses of wild food plants in indigenous cultures, and his work has taken him to Africa, India, SE Asia, Europe and the USA.

Robin has taught foraging at Eden Project, appeared on BBC2’s Edwardian Farm, Soul Seekers TV series, appeared on national and local BBC radio and been recommended in BBC Good Food magazine, Sainsbury’s magazine as well as in The Guardian, The Times, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph, GQ, The Ecologist and Green Parent, to name a few.
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Photo identification is at the end of the notebook
Botanical Profile

Common Name
Stinging nettle

Scientific Name
Urtica dioica

Family
Urticaceae

Botanical Description
The stem is erect, 60cms to 90cms high, and usually unbranched (simple); and the leaves are opposite, egg- or lance-shaped, pointed, heart-shaped (cordate) at the base, and coarsely toothed. The whole plant is of a dull green and is more or less downy and covered with stinging hairs.
Flowers

May to September.

Status

Perennial. Native.

Habitat

Woodland, wasteland, cultivated land, river banks, grassland.

Parts Used For Food

Leaves, shoots, young tips, seeds.

Harvest Time

Spring through Autumn.
Introduction

Nettle’s long relationship with human culture has led to a number of different applications. Some stranger than others.

It is said that nettle drives frogs from bee hives, although few modern beekeepers complain about frogs in their hives.

In addition, nettle oil was once burnt in lamps and the plant was hung in kitchens as a fly deterrent – but apparently it was not a particularly effective deterrent.

Mashed nettles make a cheap and nutritious poultry feed, being particularly good for young turkeys.

It is said cattle who are fed nettle produce better milk (although this is contrary to the aforementioned folk stories) and chickens who eat nettle lay more and stronger eggs.

The plant makes a rich black compost which is great for gardeners. In Dublin, gardeners are said to use nettles to turn green gooseberries a reddish colour by layering the fruit with nettles in a tub.

I find this fact interesting because when I make nettle cordial, it has a pink-reddish colour and tastes of gooseberries.

In France, for instance, a paper was made from nettle fibres.
A principle use of nettle was as a cloth – a practice which dates back to the Bronze Age.

In Hans Christian Andersen’s (1805–1875) tale The Seven Swans a young princess weaves eleven shirts made from nettle to lift a spell cast on the swan brothers.

Nettles were cultivated in Scotland, Denmark and Norway to make fishnets, coarse sailcloth and fine linens. After flax was introduced nettle cloth was still woven for household use and called scotchcloth from the 16th to 19th centuries.

Nettle cloth was made in Scotland as late as the 18th century. The Scottish poet Thomas Campbell (1777–1844) wrote about sleeping in nettle sheets and dining at a table with a nettle cloth.

Naturally, the greenness of nettle was associated with St Patrick’s Day in Scotland and Ireland where it was popularly used for dye and cloth.

Nettle is described as having a long association with indigenous cultures in North America, particularly in British Columbia, Alaska and the Aleutians where it was an important source of stem fibre for cordage (cords and ropes, such as for ship’s rigging).

Until fairly recently in parts of northern Europe nettle was still cultivated for making cloth. In the First World War Germany reportedly used large quantities of nettle – around 2½ million kg
- to make military clothing. The resultant German uniforms were 85% nettle fibre.

In the Second World War, nettle was collected by schoolchildren to use as a dye and nettle dye was used to camouflage uniforms in Britain.

Nettle cloth is made in parts of the Himalayas and it has been seen for sale in a shop in Florence. Apparently with delicate threads of the material dyed with beautiful green and brown vegetable dyes.

A study by Eser and Onal (2015) found nettle leaf extract was a potent natural colouring for dying wool and cotton fabrics with the potential to be an important agent for today’s textile industry.

Folklore

In the language of flowers nettle says "You are hateful". In Medieval flower symbolism it signifies envy and in Victorian times the nettle meant slander.

Ruled by Mars, the planet of war, and associated with Scorpio, the astrological sign of the scorpion, nettle’s personality could be irritable, intolerant or angry.

In Ireland in County Mayo, a person of grumpy character would be told; "Looks like you pissed on nettles this morning".
Nettle is easily identifiable by touch thanks to its stinging hairs, which made it at once shunned for the burning pain it inflicted and sought after for its usefulness in folk traditions.

The name nettle is rumoured to come from the Anglo-Saxon word for needle, which refers either to its stinging hairs (needles) or its importance as a source of thread.

In Holland, the name 'netel' is perhaps derived from 'noedle' meaning needle, which reflected its value for cloth-makers.

Other authorities suggest its name comes from net, from the Latin 'nassa' meaning fishnet, while Urtica is from the Latin to sting.

A myth of the Algonquin Indians tells how the Creator, Sirakitehak, taught humans to make nets from nettles after watching a spider spin its web.

Nettle’s tendency to grow in abandoned places led to its portrayal as a plant of desolation in Irish mythology.

When the children of Lir returned in the form of swans after hundreds of years in exile they found their former home overgrown with nettles.

Similarly, Oisin, the last of the Fianna, discovered his great hall deserted save for nettles. And the ancient Irish law of Adamnan forbade the killing of women and children lest you be cursed by "elder and nettle and corncrake", or in other words, ruin.
Throughout history the nettle is known as both an enemy and friend:

*The Nettles stinke, yet they make recompense,*
*If your belly by the Collicke paine endures,*
*Against the Collicke Nettle-seed and honey*
*Is Physick: better none is bad for money.*
*It breedeth sleepe, staies vomit, fleams doth soften,*
*It helpses him of the Gowte that eats it often.*

Harmful and helpful, the nettle is a trickster plant:

*If you gently grasp a nettle,*
*It will sting you for your pains.*
*Grasp it tightly like a rod of metal,*
*And it soft as silk remains.*

A well-known children's prank in the English countryside was to grasp a nettle firmly to crush the stinging hairs and avoid getting stung, while telling town children "the nettle doesn't sting this month". The townies would gingerly touch the plant and start yelping in pain.

Despite this countryside bravado, today's herbals recommend wearing gloves while gathering nettles, even if you do have a Spartan belief in the protection of the firm grasp.

To dream of nettles was a double-edge sword. If you dreamt of gathering nettles it meant someone thought well of you or, if you were married, that your marriage would be a happy one; but
to dream of being stung by nettles meant that disappointment lay ahead.

Nettles did not always spell doom and gloom. In a German folk song, the plant symbolises love and fertility.

And in a Welsh poem, the beautiful maiden Blodeuedd was made from enchanted flowers, including the nettle, to be the wife of Lleu Skilful Hand.

Although the story does have a sting in the tale: Blodeuedd betrayed her husband with her lover Goronwy.

The list of folk tales, remedies and uses for nettle are endless – a stinging plant that symbolises malice and love, that foretells good and bad fortune, that is harmful and helpful. Is the nettle friend or foe?

It at least has the courtesy to provide a remedy for its own sting in the dock leaf that grows nearby and which can be rubbed on skin to ease the burning.

This is the traditional way to ease the sting. However it only really works when using a young dock leaf that has been plucked near to the ground. If it is fresh enough, you will find a cooling slime on the leaf stalk, similar to aloe vera.

Don't forget to say: "Nettle in, dock out; dock rub nettle out" at the same time.
Angela Paine describes nettle as an ancient plant that has survived several ice ages in Britain.

It needs fertile soil, sunlight, and moisture to thrive so it was not until the first human settlers began to cut down part of the forest that the nettle found ideal growing conditions. Archaeologists found plenty of evidence that it grew near Neolithic settlements.

Today there are around 35 species of nettle from the common, stinging or greater stinging nettle to the small, burning nettle or dwarf nettle.

The nettle of myth and legend is not always specifically identified. Plants that had stings, prickles and thorns were often revered as protective plants but they were just as equally feared.

The stinging nettle was an obvious ingredient in witches’ potions and wherever nettles grew at a crossroad one could be sure witches gathered.

Local names like devil’s leaf or devil’s apron lend credence to a belief in its dubious origins. In parts of the British Isles it was believed that nettles sprung from where Satan and the fallen angels fell to earth after their expulsion from heaven.

Others said nettles grew out of dead men’s bodies, from the spilling of innocent blood, or from human urine; the latter might be true, because nettles prefer nitrogen-rich soil.
In Ireland, however, it was said where nettle and comfrey grew together a monastery had once stood.

In the King James Bible, the nettle is a plant of wickedness and desire:

*And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses thereof: and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls.* - Isaiah 34:13

Another verse supports the nettle’s sinfulness...

*I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down.* - Proverbs 24:30

An Irish legend explains nettle’s fall from grace. The plant was once the most beautiful flower in the Garden of Eden, but the serpent that tempted Eve hid under it and since then the nettle has stung anyone who touched it.

This might explain why the nettle is called the devil’s apron in Ireland.

Around the world the nettle’s reputation as a mischievous plant didn’t fare much better. In Denmark it was said elves dwelled where nettles grew.
In India nettles were the symbol of a demon, because the great serpent had poured its poison onto the plant.

 Appropriately, nettle was used to punish people for their sins in several strange customs.

 In the Netherlands, the last person to rise on Saturday morning before Whitsuntide was beaten with a bunch of nettles, and on Whit Monday the last cowherd in the meadow was beaten with nettle. And a slothful person might also be crowned with a wreath of nettles.

 In Nottinghamshire, England, stinging nettles were used to punish children who failed to wear oak on Oak Apple Day. Clearly nettle was not liked everywhere. In Hereford, England, for instance, it was said if nettles were beaten with sticks on the first new moon in May, they'll wither and not come up again.

 But not everyone wanted to get rid of the plant. In Belgium the nettle was a powerful talisman against evil and sorcery.

 A principle use for nettle in folklore was for magical protection. This is likely because the plant was also a sacred herb of the Germanic god Thor or Donar, a benevolent deity of thunder, fertility and marriage.

 Thus Thor lent nettle his formidable reputation as a warrior and protector. Anyone who bore the plant of Thor about their person would have nothing to fear. This custom continued into Medieval times.
A variation was to carry nettle and milfoil (yarrow) about your person to protect against evil influences.

In Scandinavian customs, as the holy plant of the god of thunder and lightning, naturally the nettle could withstand storms. It was thrown on the fire to protect the home from lightning.

Mountaineers vulnerable to thunderstorms would also throw nettle on their camp fires as an offering to the thunder god.

Nettle also protected the land as well as people, the hearth and home. An old superstition tells us to place four broomsticks and four nettles in four corners of a field, while saying a German rhyme: "Da Krah, das is dein, Und was ick steck, ist mein!", which translates as "There you are crow, that is for you, and what I plant is mine!", to protect the crops from birds.

From farmer’s friend to farmer’s almanac, another superstition said if nettle flowered early it meant the crops needed to be sown soon; but if clumps of nettle grew to a great height in summer or autumn, then a harsh winter was coming.

In Germany, nettles were gathered before sunrise to protect cattle from evil spirits.

Ancient beliefs about nettle, particularly surrounding its powers of protection, were carried into early botanical texts.

Flemish herbalist Rembert Dodoens (Dodonaeus) wrote.
He who has the Nettles on him, together with a few leaves of Creeping Cinquefoil (Potentilla reptans), will be free of all spirits and apparitions which frighten man: for they take away all fear from man, as we are assured by some.

An Irish folktale tells us how nettle helped a priest to cure a sick woman. During mass a consecrated host – the sacred bread – fell from the woman’s lips into a crack in the floor. A bunch of nettles grew in the crack after the church fell into ruins and protected the host. The priest and a boy were able to find the host thanks to the nettles and rescue it. When the host was returned to the woman she was cured.

Indeed, people continued to believe that nettle was a protective herb until the early 1900s.

In Cornwall, England, the first day of May, or May Day, was known as Stinging Nettle Day. It was customary to pick a nettle leaf and eat it wrapped in a dock leaf to save you from harm until the next Stinging Nettle Day.

Further, it’s thought the plant’s common names of devil’s wort (or Dutch duivelskruid) originates from this Cornish superstition.

Nettles were popular as love charms and used for divination, although whether this association was due to Thor’s governance over fertility and marriage is unclear.
Around the world many customs sprang from the belief that nettle symbolised purity and fertility. For example, if a young girl urinated on nettles and they withered it meant she wasn’t a virgin, but if a woman urinated on nettles and they withered it meant she was barren.

A stranger experiment by William Coles involved giving ale or beer with nettle roots to a young girl and "if it remain with her she is a maid, otherwise not."

A boy or girl who was sincere could break a nettle without being stung – or if they were aware of the countryside trick played on unsuspecting town folk mentioned earlier.

A young girl who planted nettle in wet sand could foretell from which quarter her lover would come if the nettle bent overnight, but if the tips bent down it signified an early death.

Nettle was used as a love oracle on the eve of St George’s Day by Muslim girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina up until the 1900s. In southern parts of County Cork, Ireland, boys prowled the streets on Nettlemass Night (May Eve) to sting their schoolmates or unfortunate passersby, while girls would sting the boys they liked.

Similar customs persisted in Devon and Cornwall, England, on Stinging Nettle Day (May Day).
A more bizarre custom involved beating yourself with nettles – the number of blisters you received would reveal the number of years before you would marry.

The best times to gather nettles for use in magic or medicine were during holy festivals such as the Germanic Yuletide (Christmas Day, New Year’s Day, Epiphany), the spring festival (Easter, Whitsun), at midsummer (St John the Baptist’s feast day), and the harvest festival (Assumption Day).

Picking nettles often involved a ritual of some sort. In some areas people lashed themselves with nettles dipped in urine on St John’s Day.

In Russia and Belgium, picking nettles involved children or adults jumping over fires.

In Kincardineshire, Scotland, it’s said nettles should be gathered at midnight.

Nettle has a long association with dairy farmers in plant lore. Superstitions led farmer’s to protect their herds from witches and other evil influences by using nettle.

In 1641, at a witch trial in Transylvania, Romania, the milk of a bewitched cow was poured onto nettle and the nettle beaten to make the witch appear.
At Christmas, a nettle root was placed in milk intended for cheese-making and then poured onto a dunghill on Epiphany to prevent witches’ from cursing the dairy.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, nettles were used to strike the butter churn if the butter didn’t form properly. The buttermilk was then poured into a hole in the earth with a stake driven through and the nettle buried next to it.

In the early to mid 20th century, farmers in Russia, Finland and Hungary hung nettle on stable doors on St John’s Day to ward off evil.

In Germany, nettles gathered before sunrise would protect cattle from evil spirits. In Austria and Italy people collected nettle before dawn to protect the cattle from demonic spirits, and in Hungary people cut nettle stems on Whitsuntide eve to protect cattle from bewitchment. There was also a general belief that nettle in the house protected milk from witches and trolls.

It would take a bard a lifetime to tell all the tales of nettle.

Food

If you strim nettles, or gather them regularly from a patch, they will keep producing new growth. A good reason to forage them on a weekly basis.
Even in high Summer, when most of the advice in the books says not to eat them, you will often find them growing in shade.

It’s a myth that you cannot eat nettle through the year. You just need to know how to forage properly.

Here is an interesting proposition put forward by James A Duke in The Handbook of Edible Weeds.

If, instead of spraying our weeds, we ate the safe ones, we would save all that energy tied up in the manufacture and application of pesticides (US farmers spend an estimated $3 billion a year applying herbicides) and in the raising, processing, and shipping of more conventional foods.

Duke claims, as one of the few foragers who still eats stinging nettles raw, that the nettles "quit stinging by the time they get to the throat, at least in my trials".

Indeed, nettle is a plant of extraordinary nutritional value packed full of A, C and some B vitamins.

Francois Couplan, the French ethnobotanist, claims nettle has seven times more vitamin C than oranges, three times more iron than spinach, with calcium rivalling that of some cheese, and that their protein content is nearly as high as soy-beans.

In effect, nettle has three times more nutrient density than anything you would buy in the shops or be able to grow yourself.
In other studies, 100g of fresh nettles are shown to contain: 670mg potassium, 590mg calcium, 18mcg chromium, 270mcg copper, 86mg magnesium, and 4.4mg iron.

Given it’s cheap to cultivate and grows in abundance, it’s a wonder nettle products aren’t flying off the supermarket shelves.

Today’s herbalists and naturopaths usually recommend collecting young, tender nettles early in the year and, of course, wearing gloves.

Some herbals explain this further by suggesting older nettle plants have an undesirable diuretic effect or might even be considered toxic. But see my comment above regarding this cultural-myth.

Once gathered, the fresh plant is soaked in cold water for 10 minutes to encourage the 'manyleggeds' to depart.

Another good tip for soaking wild plants before use is adding a pinch of salt to the water, which encourages small creatures to depart quicker.

Like many of our wild edible plants, nettle can be used in a wide variety of dishes. It can be substituted for spinach in salty recipes for casseroles, stews, broths, soup, and pastries.
Dried powdered nettles can be sprinkled on meals like a superfood – try adding it to smoothies, omelettes, baked goods and mashed potatoes.

As a spring vegetable, it has long been associated with health and vitality. Something that was no surprise to early herbalists.

Before the kind of food preservation we now enjoy, winter meals were usually limited to meat and stored grains, and dried plants and fruits. Scurvy was thus a recurring problem in many northern cultures. The early dark green nettle plants have always been thought of as a spring tonic and antiscorbutic remedy and were an important part of traditional diets.

A nettle pudding was made in East Anglia as a "pick-me-up after the winter". In 1661 Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary that he found the dish "very good". Other texts say Pepys tried nettle porridge at W. Symons and liked it a lot.

Nettle porridge or pudding was a hearty dish cooked in Scotland and Ireland. In Ireland the porridge was called 'brachan neantog' and made from nettle and oatmeal. The young leaves were boiled and mixed with oatmeal as nettle 'kail'.

Nettles were gathered for early spring kail until around the 1800s. And nettles were also used in porridge in Scotland, in both Scotland and Ireland a nettle haggis was made, and in Ireland also a nettle gruel.
Further afield, in the remote hilly regions of Nepal, nettle was an important source of food. As in Europe, the shoots and leaves were gathered as a vegetable or to be made into soup.

Interestingly, a type of porridge was a popular dish made by adding nettle to various grains with salt and chilli.

In the Basque country, nettle is used to strain milk for a traditional dessert, 'mamia', made using milk curd and rennet served with honey.

As a spring tonic, nettle proved that food really can be medicine. It was thought to be helpful for poor circulation and anaemia, and we now know that nettle contains iron and vitamin C.

Other spring tonics with nettle, in addition to porridge and pudding, were tea and beer. Even today nettle tea is considered delicious as well as filling and nutritious, and can be sweetened with honey or even salted as a broth.

It’s easy to understand the attraction of nettle as a spring vegetable in pastimes. It was readily available for harvesting after a harsh winter and when cutback it would re-grow vigorously for a second or third spring crop.

In Ulster, Ireland, its name 'cul faiche' meant field cabbage. The weed was said to be one of three plants that fed people in Ireland during the great famine, although I cannot find the reference to what the other two would have been. Potatoes would have been one, I assume.
During the famine it was boiled as greens, made into soup, and the iron-rich nettle water (a by-product of cooking) was drunk.

The nettle-bed was once a common feature of English gardens. Nettles were often included in recipes in Victorian cookbooks and sold as a vegetable in 18th-century markets.

In 1940s Britain, nettle was a common vegetable due to rations and food shortages during the Second World War.

In short, nettle's use as a food stuff was nothing short of legendary, or so says an Irish tale about a saint who lived on nothing but the herb.

The story goes that St Colmcille asked an old woman why she was cutting nettles and she replied that she lived on nettle pottage. Humbled by the old woman, the saint said he would only live on nettle pottage. But this worried his servant who secretly poured meat juice into his master's meal using a hollow pipe.

Gradually St Colmcille became suspicious, but the servant maintained he used "nothing but nettles, unless something comes from the iron of the pot, or from the stick used to stir it," thus satisfying his master and keeping his conscience clear.

A similar story in Ireland tells of a St Coemgen who lived for seven years eating nothing but nettle and sorrel.
In another legend, the Life of St Brigid, the saint fed a large number of people from an empty larder by turning nettles into butter and tree bark into delicious food.

The customs that surround eating nettle could fill a cookbook. In Jewish traditions, nettle is one of five bitter herbs of the Mishna that must be eaten at the Feast of the Passover.

In Britain, Ireland and in some European countries like Germany, Belgium, France and Italy, young nettle leaves were commonly cooked as a vegetable or used to make soup.

Nettle is one of the ingredients in Maundy Thursday soup, because it was believed that gathering and eating nettle on Maundy Thursday would free you from the worldly cares of riches. In Russia, a nettle dye was used to stain eggs yellow on Maundy Thursday.

Similar customs in southern Germany, Austria and Italy meant one of the seven or nine cakes eaten on St John’s Day should be nettle cake. While anyone wishing to have a good year ahead should eat nettle cake on New Year’s Day.

In fact, Pliny recommended that nettle was eaten to ensure good health all year round, and in Ireland it was believed taking three meals with nettle in May would prevent illness for the rest of the year.

In a collection of Roman cookery recipes, nettle is included as a vegetable that is recommended as a medicinal herb.
The female nettle, when the sun is in the position of Aries, is supposed to render valuable services against ailments of various kinds.

Many superstitions surround nettles that were picked in May, which was an auspicious time of year for making lucky charms.

In west Galway (Ireland), a man would gather nettles on May Eve and make pressed nettle juice for his household to "keep a good fire" in them for the year ahead.

However, legends warned against gathering nettles after May Day, because the devil was out and about picking nettles to make his shirt.

Some European fairytales said that nettles, and thistles, were the vegetables of the devil. Whether this made nettle more or less enticing to eat is unclear, although its reputation as a 'devilish' foodstuff is quite understandable considering that raw stinging nettles were sometimes offered.

In Sicily, people ate the raw nettles after breaking the stinging hairs against their trouser leg.

There’s little doubt that nettle is more palatable as a cooked vegetable. Cooking nettles, even briefly, destroys their stinging property and renders them completely safe for consumption.
Steamed nettle greens can reputedly be used in any recipe – from a simple side dish with a little salt as an accompaniment to fish or chopped into a hearty broth.

Drying nettles also destroys the stinging hairs and allows them to be sprinkled on savoury dishes for extra flavour. For those who prefer healthier snacks, nettle leaves can be blanched and eaten like sea kale.

Nettle is listed by the Council of Europe as a natural food flavouring and is approved for use in herbal teas and soups.

Two of the most famous uses for nettle in food production is for cheese and beer, which most will agree make the perfect pair. Let’s start with nettle cheese.

Nettle’s important role in myth and legend as a protector of milk, butter and cheese moved into culinary use.

Its juice or a decoction of the plant could curdle milk making it a good source of rennet for cheese makers. Perhaps this was something that had been observed during the strange rituals that used nettle to drive away evil from the dairy.

Whatever the reasoning behind the tradition, nettle has become a useful plant in food preservation and not only for keeping cheese.
In England, nettle leaves are used to wrap mold-ripened cheese called Cornish Yarg. In areas of Central Europe it’s used to wrap butter and meat to keep them longer in summer.

Stone fruits and tomatoes are also keep fresh for longer by pickling in nettle leaves.

In modern cheese-making nettle has proved a palatable product for today’s consumer.

A study by Fiol and team (2016) published on Science Direct found that not only was stinging nettle an acceptable alternative to vegetable coagulant rennet in cheese making, but it also opened new gastronomical possibilities for recipes in vegetarian cheeses and yoghurts.

More importantly, consumer acceptance of nettle as a rennet for milk curds and cheeses would help "increase the value of a product using edible wild herbs".

The researchers tested various recipes from nettle cheese croquette, cheese wrapped in blanched nettle leaves, and sautéed vegetables mixed with nettle cream cheese.

But before you take a bite of delicious nettle cheese consider the plant’s tricky nature. While many stories tell of nettle driving off evil from dairy farms, others spoke of cattle grazing on nettle yielding a bloody milk and becoming bewitched.
Luckily a counter-charm was available, but it involved a long ritual using – yes, you’ve guessed it – nettle.

Once you’ve eaten a platter of nettle cheese, and hopefully escaped enchantment, you’ll need a tankard of nettle beer to wash it down.

Almost as many superstitions surrounded nettle beer or ale, and these were often associated with the plant’s connection to the thunder god Thor.

In Germany, nettle was placed on beer barrels to protect the brewery from being struck by lightning. There may be another explanation for this practice.

Today it’s known that certain chemical components in nettle affect the bacteria that break down alcohol, and that these bacteria rapidly multiply before a storm.

It’s possible that at some point the link was made between placing nettle in beer at around the same time as a summer storm and the outcome of an improved brew.

There are numerous historical records and recipes for beers and ales made with nettle, which was once a "standard tonic" to be drunk in spring or summer.

As a tonic, nettle beer or ale was, of course, not only drunk for pleasure but for medicinal purposes. The ale was supposedly
good for treating jaundice and the beer, as made by cottagers, was drunk as an old folk remedy for gout and rheumatism.

Today there are many variations on the homemade brews using nettle, but in general the young nettles tops are gathered in early spring and boiled for a good hour or longer before leaving to cool; other ingredients are added such as lemon, ginger and brown sugar.

Given that most recipes use large quantities of nettle, there might be some truth to the belief that nettle beer was an exceptionally strengthening and nutritious spring tonic – particularly after a lack of sunshine and meagre diets over winter.

The herbal historical researcher Gabrielle Hatfield observed the drinking of nettle beer in rural England. In East Anglia, nettle beer was "considered to be a primary medicinal beer of the region" and in Lincolnshire it was recommended for tuberculosis.

American herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner, finds drinking nettle beer alleviates arthritis in his hands – surely a more pleasant method that thrashing oneself with the plant.

*Having suffered from arthritic conditions in my hands from years of using hammers and typewriters, I have found a periodic use of nettles in this manner (every five years or so) alleviates all the symptoms I have suffered. When made into beer or tea, the fluids*
contained in the fresh stinging hairs dissolve in the water, and when consumed produce the same effects.

Aside from the beverage’s obvious health benefits, Buhner, one suspects, is a connoisseur of nettle beer. He describes its taste as sublime; "The taste really is indescribable, being a blend of a number of flavours, a veritable gustatory extravaganza."

Given its past popularity as a wholesome green and a delicious drink, will nettle ever return to our kitchens as a culinary delicacy?

Around the world the wild herb is used in different culinary sensations. In his book The Wild Life, John Lewis-Stempel recommended nettle puree spread on toast topped with a poached egg.

In Turkey, nettle is known as a common wild edible green and in Croatia it’s sold in the vegetable markets of Dalmatia.

North American herbals suggest nettle is an excellent staple and among the best wild vegetables with an exquisite taste. The raw young leaves can be added to salads or cooked as greens in all types of dishes – sweet and savoury, or made into soup.

In South Africa the Sotho and Zulu add cooked salted nettle leaves as a relish, the Lovedu use nettle leaves like spinach. In the Stutterheim district of the Cape boiled nettle tops are mixed with meal to make a paste, and in Lesotho young nettles are eaten as pot herbs.
If you feel inspired to gather nettle and cook it at home, do take heed of Pliny’s warning – should you also choose to raise geese – for the plant is said to be fatal to goslings!

**Medicine**

The employment of nettle in folk remedies dates back over 2,000 years. It appears as a remedy in ancient Egyptian writings, and is among the healing herbs of the Bible, widely used by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

The plant was listed in the works of Theophrastus, Pliny and Hippocrates.

Of course, magic and healing went hand in hand in early medicine. A love charm for divination became a helpful herb for fertility.

The Romans would brush the genitals of a 'frigid' woman or an animal refusing to be serviced to stimulate sexual drive, though it would seem to us today to have had the opposite effect!

Roman writer Caius Petronius claimed a man’s virility was similarly improved if he was whipped with nettles below the belly button.

Nettle root was believed to promote love if dug up on St John’s Day and placed on an altar, while saying Hail Mary three times; the root supposedly stimulated pregnancy too.
In Greece, the seeds were used as an aphrodisiac. In parts of Europe, if a girl was considered to be a nymphomaniac, it was said; "the daughter has urinated in the nettles".

Not all accounts supported nettle’s reputation as an aphrodisiac.

The testimony of a gypsy (1952) in the New Forest area (England) revealed yet another amazing application of the Nettle: that of a contraceptive.

_The method was for a man to lay a thick layer of nettle leaves like a sole in his socks, and wear them for 24 hours before intercourse. The gypsy said he had tried it and it had worked._

Centuries earlier, King Henry VIII’s physician Andrew Borde had a similar idea about the plant.

He wrote that "nettles in the codpiece" was a good remedy for married men who desired other women. It’s doubtful that Henry VIII followed his doctor’s advice.

From the fires of passion to the fires of healing. In the Doctrine of Signatures, a fiery (stinging) plant like nettle could cure burning conditions of body and soul.

Thus a person suffering from nettle rash, skin rashes or eczema, or who was feeling irritable could drink a decoction of nettles to feel better.
Fighting fire with fire, Mrs. Grieve wrote that cloths soaked in nettle tincture or a nettle ointment could heal burns.

Nettle was purported to cure a fever thanks to its fiery nature. The leaves would be used to treat a patient (in Germany), or the roots sprinkled with salt and a spell, or by simply leaving the plant to wither on the patient.

Culpeper praised the nettle’s hot qualities as being good for warming a spring cold, among other things.

You know Mars is hot and dry, and you know as well that Winter is cold and moist; then you may know as well the reason why Nettle-tops eaten in the Spring consume the phlegmatic superfluities in the body of man, that the coldness and moistness of Winter hath left behind.

In Guernsey, the British Channels Isles, a liniment made from nettles, salt and oil was used by fisherman as a protection against the cold by rubbing on the spine, soles of the feet and wrists.

Pliny the Elder (77 AD) wrote about the roots of another species of nettle – the autumn nettle (no longer in Britain) – which he claimed could cure a person of their fever if the person’s name and the name of their father was said when the nettle was dug up.
Herbalist Catherine Oswald prescribed picking nettle by its root "three successive mornings before sunrise" to cure "trembling fever" or ague, an old word to describe a fever or shivering fit.

Nettle’s warming quality made it a popular treatment for rheumatism and other ailments, such as dropsy, paralysis, lumbago and sciatica, that could benefit from rubbing a stinging plant on the body to stimulate circulation and create 'warmth'.

In Ireland nettle was used to treat dropsy (an excessive accumulation of fluids in the body) by boiling down plants picked from a churchyard, and in Russian folk medicine an infusion of the roots was used instead.

Ancient Egyptians also applied an infusion of nettle to relieve arthritis and lumbago.

Roman soldiers famously rubbed their bodies with nettle to promote good circulation and to stay warm. This being particularly the case in cold, damp Britain, where the troops beat themselves with nettle to help alleviate rheumatic joints.

It’s not clear whether the stinging nettle (Urtica dioica) that we know today was the same nettle used by the Romans for self-flagellation.

In Camden's Brittania of 1695 he states the Romans brought the seed of nettle to grow, to beat themselves, to keep them warm.
However, this is now considered false information, as there is no record in the Archaeo-botanical Computer Database validating such a claim.

By 1794, self-flagellating with nettles had become the "time-honoured tradition" for stimulating and restoring paralysed limbs.

Grieve wrote that flogging with nettle to treat ailments such as rheumatism was known as urtication.

However, in some places people would lie down in nettles to get stung and allow the ailment, or the evil, to leave the body in the blisters.

While urtication seems like an archaic method for treating rheumatism today, there is some method in the madness.

Stephen Harrod Buhner explains the stinging hairs of nettle act like miniature needles when broken and inject a fluid containing histamines, acetylcholine and formic acid just under the surface of the skin.

These components play an important role in the transmission of nerves, which might be useful in treating arthritic conditions. He compares the use of nettles for rheumatism as similar to naturopathic treatments using bee stings, which also contain acetylcholine, although nettles are probably safer to use and don’t involve killing a bee.
Gerard added to nettle’s stinging virtues by writing it makes "the vital spirit more lively". No kidding!

Hildegard in her work Physica, commented on nettle’s 'warm type' being good for purging mucus from the stomach and prescribed it should "worms grow up from the harmful and bad humors that are poisonous in the person".

She also suggested anointing a person on the chest and temples with the juice of nettles to dispel forgetfulness.

In ancient times when death by poisoning was perhaps more common, or a more popular method of assassination, antidotes to poisons often featured in medical manuscripts.

Ancient writers like Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Pliny prescribed nettle for various ailments – sprains, nosebleeds, colds, abscesses, gout, cancerous sores – and as an antidote for poisoning by certain other plants, bites and stings inflicted by dogs, salamanders, snakes, and scorpions.

Hippocrates’ student Apollodorus boiled a broth of nettle and tortoise as an antidote to the bite of a salamander, and for the poison of henbane, serpents and scorpions.

Gerard later wrote that nettle is an effective remedy for poisoning caused by hemlock, mushrooms and quicksilver.

So widely valued was nettle among early physicians that Hippocrates and his followers listed 61 remedies for the plant.
These included: a purgative of the uterus, to expel intestinal worms, for gout and other joint diseases, and to restore hair loss.

Adding to the teachings of Hippocrates, Galen later recommended nettle leaves as a diuretic and laxative, for dog bites, gangrene, swelling, and nosebleeds, to relieve menstruation, for illnesses of the spleen, pleurisy, pneumonia, asthma, tinea and mouth sores.

Clearly nettle was one of the cure-alls of the ancient world. Another important use for nettle in traditional herbal medicine was as a blood tonic and astringent being able to purify or strengthen the blood and to staunch bleeding respectively.

The Aztecs Herbal of 1552 includes a remedy of crushed nettles in milk to stop nosebleeds and prescribed a nettle poultice for arthritis.

Pechey wrote that nettle was notable for its blood staunching properties and for stopping a nosebleed.

Grieve also noted nettle was used as "an arrester of bleeding" when applied as a tincture or taken internally as a fresh herb for bleeding from the nose, lungs or stomach.

Nettle’s use as a vulnerary (promote the healing of wounds) herb continued in herbal medicine with descriptions of crushed nettles being used to staunch nosebleeds or drinking nettle tea to purify the blood.
While it remained popular for treating heavy menstrual bleeding and anaemia, among many other conditions like haemorrhoids, bronchitis, boils and skin complaints, measles and rashes, rheumatism, paralysed limbs, circulatory problems, epilepsy, and poor digestion.

In Medieval times, nettle was one of the ingredients used in a remedy for shingles. The patient must drink the remedy for 10 nights, followed by drinking mistletoe (now known to be poisonous) in wine for nine days and without any meat to eat. Soothing salves were made with nettle and other plants to apply externally.

Medieval physicians also prescribed nettle for a plethora of other conditions from constipation to sinusitis.

Home uses for nettle involved treating coughs, colds and chest complaints.

Gerard noted it was useful for whooping cough in children.

In Russian folk medicine, nettle tea was helpful for asthma. In the Scottish Highlands, nettle roots were a remedy for consumption (tuberculosis).

While in England the seeds were used (Somerset) or a nettle beer was drunk (East Anglia); smoke from burning nettles was said to be good for the chest.
Nettle was recommended for treating problems in the lungs and kidneys by Salmon in 1693 and Pechey in 1694, and later supported by Grieve, in her work A Modern Herbal, for treating asthma.

A list of 30–40 ailments that could be treated by nettle was given by William Coles, along with the suggestion that the herb could foretell the outcome of a patient. If a nettle put in a pot of the patient’s urine was fresh and green a day later, the patient would live, but if not...

In Wales, nettle broth was used to stimulate appetite and to promote sleep. While another Welsh legend said "eating nettles in spring would cultivate a good memory".

A nettle charm in Devonshire was a remedy for sore eyes.

A woman who had never seen her father had to blow into the patient’s eyes through a hole made in a nettle leaf, before she had put her hand to anything for the day.

In the 18th century, nettle juice was dripped into the ear for earache and chopped nettles in egg white were rubbed on the temples for insomnia.

Elizabeth Blackwell’s Curious Herbal noted nettle’s application for nosebleeds, wounds, as a diuretic, for jaundice, coughs and shortness of breath.
The preacher John Wesley, in his work Primitive Physic, wrote nettle was a good treatment for bleeding wounds, internal bleeding, pleurisy, worms, sciatica and as a cure for nettle rash.

By the 19th century, nettle was still used for a large number of conditions. In fact, its use seemed to grow from era to era.

Physicians recommended nettle for scurvy, tuberculosis, rheumatism, urinary and kidney disease, and even in large doses for cancer.

Thornton’s 19th-century Family Herbal prescribed nettle for treating anything from cancers and paralysed limbs to nosebleed and scurvy.

In the Fens, nettle leaves, followed by dock leaves, were rubbed on a patient suffering from smallpox. This continued up until the late 19th century.

Around the world it seemed there was nothing nettle couldn’t cure.

In Ireland, nettles were used to treat sores, rashes, eczema, boils, various infections, colds, coughs, rheumatism, to purify the blood, rid the body of worms (particularly in children), dropsy, jaundice, and it was apparently the best cure for measles.
In Russia, nettle leaves were an ingredient in a medicine for chronic hepatitis, cholangitis, cholecystitis and constipation, being considered "powerfully diuretic".

In the King's America Dispensatory of the 1800s, which lists plants in America used in a branch of medicine known as Eclectic, nettle is recommended as a diuretic for treating cystitis and urinary incontinence.

The Eclectics claimed the plant was astringent and haemostatic, and useful for eczema, diarrhoea and haemorrhoids.

In Native American traditions, pregnant women drank nettle tea as a strengthening tonic for their uterus, blood and babies.

Among India’s documented lists of useful plants nettle is used from root to tip. The roots and seeds can treat diarrhoea and worms, and the leaves and roots are good for dandruff and hair growth.

In Nepal, nettle has different medical uses from village to village. A root decoction treats asthma in many places. The root is chewed for dental cavities in Jajarkot and a paste of the root applied to dog bites.

The Tamangs of Sindhupalchok add sparrow and rat droppings to nettle root paste to treat cuts and wounds, whereas the Tharus of Dangdeokhuri apply the plain paste.
Danuvars and Magars use nettle root paste with another herb to reset dislocated bones.

The Rautes drink nettle juice for bile disease. In eastern Nepal, villagers eat nettle leaves for coughs and colds, and apply a paste of the fruits for dislocated bones.

In Morocco all parts of the plant are used in traditional herbal medicine: internally as a remedy for headaches, chills, tuberculosis, spleen and kidney disorders, and externally for skin problems, scabies, pruritus and haemorrhoids.

Stinging nettle is still widely employed as medicinal plant in the Mediterranean in herbal remedies for poor circulation, urinary, digestive and respiratory disorders, and externally for dandruff and alopecia.

Nettle is widely available to buy in health food stores as a tea or dried herb. Today’s herbalists might recommend its use for regulating menstrual cycles, anaemia, a detoxifying tonic, a diuretic or for diarrhoea, treating gout, rheumatism and arthritis, skin problems and hair loss.

Some herbals record its use for improving liver and kidney function, jaundice, ulcers, haemorrhoids, asthma and bronchitis.

In homeopathy, the nettle preparation 'Urtica' is prescribed to treat rheumatic gout, nettle rash, bruises and chickenpox. The
plant is not listed in the British Pharmacopoeia, although its use is still widespread in herbal medicine.

Simple home remedies for nettle include taking it from spring to autumn for hayfever and similar allergies.

It has long been a traditional treatment for improving the condition of hair. Try rinsing with nettle tonic every other night to stop hair falling out and to make it soft. Nettle is sometimes used as an ingredient of commercially produced shampoos and conditioners.

Nettle tea is considered an excellent drink for recuperating from illness, injury or surgery being rich in vitamins and minerals.

Nettle seeds too are considered helpful for exhaustion. In the early 20th century, a German naturopath used the trick in a home for the elderly. The residents got a tablespoon of nettle seeds each day. Sure enough, they got a spring in their step, a love of life - and a lovelife.

A recent study in the Journal of The American Herbalist Guild found nettle seed improved kidney function, and modern herbalists report patients with kidney problems have benefited from taking nettle seed.

Today more is known about nettle’s chemistry and how it works. Among its notable constituents are caffeic and malic acids, which are thought to be anti-inflammatory.
Nettle leaf extract is documented in the Complete German Commission E to be prescribed for rheumatism and that research has been conducted on its anti-inflammatory component caffeic acid.

Recent studies seem to support traditional uses for nettle in food and medicine with findings suggesting that the plant is highly nutritious and has a promising potential for future pharmaceuticals.

A study led by Yunuskhodzhaeva (2014) found that nettle is a promising source for pharmacologically active substances.

Joshi and team (2014) conducted a review of nettle's pharmacological properties and found various biological properties supported its use in some ailments. While many useful components were identified, the authors of the study concluded there is more scope for research.

Similarly, Asgarpanah and Mohajerani (2012) researched the phytochemical and pharmacologic properties of stinging nettle. They found potential to explore the plant as a therapeutic agent and in the development of new drugs, although they were cautious that further research was needed into its effectiveness and safety.

Ghaima and team (2013) compared the chemical activity of nettle and dandelion, and found nettle has more effective antibacterial and antioxidant activities than dandelion.
Zeipina’s team (2015) discovered antioxidant activity in nettle leaves vary at different stages of the plant’s development. Bit of a no-brainer that one really.

Bourgeois and team (2016) studied nettle for its anti-aging applications in cosmetics. They confirmed that certain nettle extracts displayed a strong antioxidant potential, which could be of interest to the cosmetic industry.

Adhikari and team (2015) compared the nutritional properties of stinging nettle flour with wheat and barley flours. They established that nettle compared favourably with wheat and barley with a higher content of certain nutrients such as protein, fibre, calcium and iron.

In addition, they supported stinging nettle’s medicinal value in the relief of arthritis, rheumatism and muscular pain.

The European Medicines Agency assessment report on Urtica dioica (2010) concluded the traditional use of nettle leaf for minor joint pain and for minor urinary complaints is supported by pharmacological research.

In addition nettle did not carry the same side effects as pharmaceutical anti-inflammatory drugs, which could cause serious gastrointestinal irritation and have cardiovascular risks if taken in excess.

However, Upton (2012) carried out a study on the effectiveness of stinging nettles as a vegetable medicine in which he states:
"There are currently no formal clinical studies proving the efficacy of any stinging nettle preparation as an antirheumatic", demonstrating that for every study found to support a theory, there is another study found to challenge it.

Personally I find Upton's research questionable, as anecdotal evidence is pretty conclusive after centuries of use in numerous cultures.

Research by Guil-Guerrero and team (2002) showed nettle leaf was a good source of essential fatty acids and other nutrients, which could be considered part of a healthy diet for humans.

Rutto and team (2013) looked at the nutritional values of raw and processed stinging nettles. Their results showed that processed nettle supplies high amounts (90–100%) of vitamin A and is rich in calcium, iron and protein.

They recommended fresh or processed nettle as a high-protein, nutritious and low calorie food source in specialised diets such as for vegetarians or diabetics.

Belščak-Cvitanović and team (2015) evaluated chocolates enriched with nettle extract and compared the nutritional content and flavour upon production and after 12 months in storage. Overall, they found the nutritional quality and taste of chocolate containing freeze-dried nettle extract performed well after storage.
Despite its proven nutritional value, nettle remains an underused ingredient of the food industry. Sanderson and Predergast (2012) looked at commercial uses of nettle and found only three enterprises that exploited the plant as a food source.

These were nettle wrapping for Yarg cheese produced by Lynher Farms and Dairies in Liskeard, Cornwall; a leaf curd product made by Leafcycle in Tiverton, Devon; and a nettle cordial and sparkling drink manufactured by Thorncroft in Stockton, Cleveland.

Bisht and team (2012) say nettle's medicinal potential warrants conservation of its natural habitats.

According to Angela Paine the most promising research on nettle involves investigation into its plant lectins which, among other things, can improve symptoms of an enlarged prostate in men.

Peuman and team (1983) found nettle plant lectins stimulated the immune system. Further research into these plant lectins presented with antifungal properties for plants and inhibited autoimmune diseases in mice.

Hyrb and team (1995) found nettle root extracts can help to improve symptoms of an enlarged prostate in men. A continuation of this research in the 1990s found nettle root extract improved urinary flow in patients with an enlarged prostate and in 1996, nettle root extract was approved for treating prostatic diseases in Germany.
Scientists found that nettle root compared favourably with the pharmaceutical drug Finasteride, prescribed for enlarged prostate, but with fewer side effects than the drug such as less cases of erectile dysfunction and headaches. Of course, it’s advised that using nettle for prostate problems is only done under proper medical supervision.

**Cautions**

Nettle’s most notorious unpleasant effect are its stinging hairs, which may cause rare allergic reactions (hives, itching, swelling) in some people.

There are some recorded cases of nettle tea causing digestive irritation and several warnings not to pick the older plants in summer or autumn, because eating these in larger quantities might cause kidney problems. See earlier reference under Food.

Today’s texts on herbal medicine sometimes list nettle as contraindicated for those who have high or low blood pressure, for people taking anti-depressants, and for diabetics.

While few drug interactions are known, it’s advised not to take nettle with digitalis. In fact, research to support many of the safety precautions for nettle is not wholly conclusive, but it may be wise to take heed of them.
Modern herbals vary in their advice to pregnant and breastfeeding women, but it’s always best to err on the side of caution and avoid using the plant during this time.
Bibliography


