
On the Virtues of Nettle



“What herb is highly valued as a delicious tasting green, an important herbal medicine, produces one of the world’s finest fabrics, and is found growing in most parts of the world, and has the personality of a menopausal woman with zest; nourishing and tender if you treat it right, but a bit prickly if you don’t?”

Rosemary Gladstar has been practicing, living, learning, teaching and writing about herbs for over 45 years. She is the author of twelve books including *Medicinal Herbs; a Beginners Guide*, *Herbal Healing for Women*, *Gladstar Herbal Recipes for Vibrant Well Being*, and *Herbal Healing for Men*.

I grew up with the wild plants around me, and since I was a child I’ve had a deep love for all things green. One of my favorite herbs is nettle. Even when I was a child and would get stung by its ‘nasty’ sting, I was in awe of it. It grew in large patches by the streams and fields in the hills of Northern California where I spent my childhood and it was so tenacious, and strong, and beautiful to me in its wild abundance. I knew the native people of our area, the Yurok & Modoc, used it as fiber and food, and, of course, as a medicine. And as I grew older, I’d read about it in my many herbals, featured the vivid dark green dried nettle in my herb shop, and dinned on its fresh harvested abundance as often as I could.



But my first 'real' experience with nettle came when I was in my early 20's. Like several other herbalists of my generation, I was studying with an elder herbalist, Norma Meyers, who lived on a remote island off the northern coast of British Columbia. Norma was an amazing teacher and quite the character. We would make the long trek to Norma's home, which often took days traveling by bus, train, small aircraft and boat. Norma was married to native fisherman who lived on the reservation, and when we would first arrive we would see the old totems carved by the elders of the tribe that guarded and protected the island. It was a welcoming sight, those beautiful old carved totems emerging out of the mist after such a long journey. We would arrive always tired and often hungry, and if I recall correctly, there were no stores on the island to purchase food at the time; and if there was, we never shopped at them, opting for wild harvested food instead. We would pack in our own food and often wild craft and eat what we found.

On my first evening at Norma's, I discovered the huge patch of nettle growing in her backyard. She had a set of gloves and scissors handily located near the door for harvesting it and I was already envisioning a delicious meal of steamed nettles as I headed out the door with those gloves on and scissors in hand. It was dusk, the world was quieting down, and there was a light mist falling, a perfect evening really. And there I was in herbalist heaven; harvesting the biggest patch of nettles I'd ever seen!

It was quiet enough for me to hear my own heartbeat, when quite clearly, I heard the nettle plant say to me, 'take off those gloves!' "Are you kidding", I responded knowing full well how painful the nettle sting was! "Take off those gloves' it

commanded again. Being somewhat familiar with plant communications ~ and already fully believing in the magic of plants ~ I decided to do what the nettle said. I took off my gloves, and continued to harvest. And that's when I experienced the 'secret' of nettle; what the old books said, but which I never fully understood. Yes, Nettle has a powerful sting and it can be quite ruthless if it wants to be, but the very juice of nettle is the best antidote for nettle rash ~ it holds its own best medicine within its green fibers. The longer I harvested the less painful the sting became. And not only less painful, but my fingers and hands felt warmly alive, like 'healer's hand's' channeling heat and light. That evening, as I harvested and felt the flow of nettle enter my hands, I entered into her magic world. Many years later, when I had entered my menopausal years, I realized that nettle was a lot like a menopausal woman; treat her just right, with kindness and respect, and you got a lot of love and nourishment back, but treat her disrespectfully and you'd get a mighty sting!

One of the most nutritious of wild foods, Nettle has been held in high esteem as both a medicine and food since antiquity. On a whim one afternoon I decided to browse through every herb book in my extensive library to see if I could find any that did not include at least some information on Nettle. I did find a few books that failed to mention the herb at all, and a few more that included only short passages about it. But most of the several hundred herb books in my library, at least those about western herbal practices, included long entries on the virtues, past and present, of this infamous and widely distributed weedy plant.

It seems every herbalists, from antiquity forward, had something to contribute about nettle. In the first century AD the Greek physician, Dioscorides,

listed nettles for a variety of illnesses including nosebleeds, anemia, menstrual problems and as a septic for wounds. Nicholas Culpepper, author of arguably the most popular herb book of the 16th century, comments on nettle 'they need no description; they may be found by feeling, in the darkest night' and goes on to expound on a long list of uses. The nettle or 'wergulu' in old Wessex dialect of the tenth century was one of the nine sacred herbs along with mugwort, plantain, watercress, chamomile, crab apple, chervil and fennel. Archeologists have discovered nettle fabric in burial shrouds at Bronze Age sites in Denmark. The 19th century Eclectics recommended nettle as a diuretic, to treat urinary, bladder and kidney problems. And passages about nettle can be found in literary works as varied as Shakespeare, works of Victor Hugo, the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson, and the poets of England and Scotland.

The medicinal uses listed in my books were numerous and included remedies for gout, rheumatism, anemia, exhaustion, menstrual difficulties, skin problems, hair tonics, and hay fever to mention just a few. There were also numerous recipes including recipes for nettle beer, nettle pudding, nettle butter, nettle soup, and all manner of nettle tinctures, teas, and more. I also found that it was one of the most important plants used in the manufacturing of cloth. And, indeed, many judged nettle fabric finer than cotton or linen. The Greeks and Romans cultivated more acres of nettle than any other crop in their empires and used it extensively as food and medicine as well as clothing. And as recently as World War I, when cotton was in scarce demand, Germany used nettle fiber to make army uniforms.

My library search, which took far longer than the afternoon I had designated, only deepened an

already raging love affair with this prickly but well meaning plant. Over the years, I've used it in my herbal practice for all manner of menstrual difficulties, for anemia, and as an effective remedy for people suffering from hay fever and allergies. It's a primary herb in several recipes I've formulated for gout and arthritic pain. And I use nettle personally as a general tonic tea to fortify and build my energy when I'm over-worked and tired. As a long time vegetarian, nettle is one of the plants I depend on for important nutrients such as calcium, iron, and protein. Though it makes a nice tasting tea and is effective tinctured and encapsulated, there's no finer or tastier way to use nettle than as a freshly steamed green. (You can imagine my delight when, during my library search, I found mention of the most famous yogi of Tibet, Milarepa, living solely on nettle soup for several years!).

In my humble and herb tainted opinion, there's really no more delicious green than fresh steamed nettles. Pick the nettle tops while still young, (use gloves to protect your hands from the inevitable nettle sting), steam thoroughly being certain there's no little stingers left unsteamed, sprinkle generously with olive oil and the juice of fresh lemon, and serve with a bit of crumbled feta.

The poet Thomas Campbell in the early 19th century wrote, "In Scotland, I have eaten Nettles, I have slept in nettle sheets and I have dined off a nettle tablecloth. The young and tender nettle is an excellent potherb. The stalks of the old nettle are as good as flax for making cloth. I have heard my mother say that she thought nettle cloth more durable than any species of linen.

The nettle beer made by cottagers is often served to old folks as a remedy for gouty and rheumatic pains and forms a pleasant drink."

"When Monsieur Madelieine saw some pheasants busy plucking out nettles, he looked at the heap of plants uprooted and already withered and said, "They are dead. Yet it would be well if people know how to make use of them. When the nettle is young, its leaf forms an excellent vegetable; when it matures, it has fibers like hemp and flax. Nettle fabric is as good as canvas. Chopped, the nettle is good for poultry; pounded it is good for cattle. The seed of the nettle mingled with fodder imparts a gloss to the coats of animals; its root mixed with salt produces a beautiful yellow color. And what does the nettle require? Little earth, no attention, no cultivation. That is all." ~ From *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo.



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a Beginners Guide, Herbal Healing for Women, Gladstar Herbal Recipes for Vibrant Well Being, and Herbal Healing for Men.

She is also the author and director of the popular home study course, *The Science and Art of Herbalism*.

In 2018 Rosemary was awarded an Honorary Doctorate for her life work from the National University of Naturopathic Medicine.

Rosemary is the co-founder and former director of both The International Herb Symposium and The New England Women's Herbal Conference, the Founding President of United Plant Savers, and the co-founder and original formulator of Traditional Medicinal Tea Company.

She recently moved from her home at Sage Mountain ~ an Herbal Retreat Center and Botanical Sanctuary where she has lived, taught and worked for the past 30 years ~ to a smaller haven where she plans to plant a small garden, dream more, do less, and spend more time with the plants.

You can find more from Rosemary at her website: www.scienceandartofherbalism.com.



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