

# Friendly Stinging Nettles

July 12, 2006

Many gardeners who have suffered through an encounter with Stinging Nettles recall unpleasant memories and wouldn't dream of planting this weed anywhere near their yard or gardens.

But there are a few good reasons to reconsider those aversions to this unpopular plant.

## The Good and Bad of Stinging Nettles

One redeeming quality which you've probably already assumed since I'm writing about it, is that Stinging Nettles is a nutritious edible weed that offers many healthful benefits to those brave enough to include it in their diet. In addition this hostile plant actually makes a great companion around the garden and is reputed to improve the growth and flavor of other vegetable and herb plants.

Most of the bad press received by Stinging Nettles is a result of the fact that the plant will literally "sting" anyone that makes the mistake of innocently brushing up against it. While not as painful as a bee sting, the overall experience could be much worse for anyone who accidentally wanders into a patch of Nettles in shorts before realizing what they've gotten themselves into.

If you look closely at the plant you'll notice tiny hair-like bristles extending from the stems and parts of the plants heart-shaped leaves. These fibers release formic acid and are the source of the skin irritation and pain that you'll experience if you even lightly brush up against this anti-social edible weed.

Brief contact with Stinging Nettles is an irritation that some find more invigorating than painful, unless of course you happen to be especially sensitive or allergic to the plant's defensive acids. In that case you may receive some relief by applying the crushed stems of Jewelweed, or a poultice made from leaves of Curly Dock or Common Plantain.

## Beneficial Uses for Stinging Nettles

As mentioned previously, Stinging Nettles is an edible weed that can be cooked and served as a leafy green vegetable or used as a soup ingredient. Cooking the plant or thoroughly drying it breaks down the stinging fiber strands that would otherwise make eating this plant impossible.

While it is perfectly edible, and some really enjoy the taste of freshly cooked Nettles, I don't include it in the same company with delectable edible weeds such as my favorite [Lambs Quarters](#). Stinging Nettles are nutritious and high in various vitamins, minerals, and other health promoting compounds.

Stinging Nettles can be dried and used to prepare a medicinal tea, the plant is also used as an ingredient in cosmetics such as hair care products. There's a significant history of medicinal uses for this plant whether as a tea, ointment, or as a supplement ingested in capsule form.

Other uses have included dye production, as a fiber plant for producing paper or clothing, and for beer making.

### **Stinging Nettles in the Home Garden**

Caution should be taken whenever growing or handling Stinging Nettles in the home garden. I've never had a problem confining and controlling the spread of Stinging Nettles, but have read complaints from other gardeners that struggled with preventing Nettles from becoming an invasive weed in their gardens.

If you're interested in growing Stinging Nettles my recommendation would be to plant a patch away from the garden beds or in an area where its growth can be restricted by natural barriers, such as a wide walkway, or by mowing around it. Another safe option would be to grow this edible weed in containers. The easiest way to get started is to transplant a couple of roots or runners from established plants.

While the claims are difficult to verify, Nettles have a reputation as being a great companion plant that promotes higher produce yields and is also reputed to increase the oil content of medicinal and culinary herbs which grown nearby.

Biodynamic Agriculture has long used Stinging Nettles as an ingredient for creating rich healthy compost, and for brewing tea formulations which are sprayed onto crops as a growth enhancer or to control insects. Stinging Nettles are also considered to be a good nurse crop for attracting beneficial insects to the organic garden.

Source: <http://www.veggiegardeningtips.com/friendly-stinging-nettles/>