

Barbara Pleasant: *Stinging Nettles*



Stinging Nettles!

It would not be accurate to say that we grow stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*), because they grow themselves. This ancient herb of European lore is the most invasive herb you will ever love or hate, except for perhaps mint. A distant mint relative, stinging nettle plants probably developed their stinging hairs to discourage feeding by animals. Animals [don't like to eat](#) plants that make their mouths burn for hours afterward.

Stinging nettles can be used as a [medicinal herb](#), and capsules of dried leaves may be of particular use when combined with saw palmetto in the treatment of [enlarged prostate](#). At our house we eat nettles as delicious steamed spring greens, or make nettle tea, at least until the plants get tough. Stinging nettle plants are also part of our deer-deterrent planting scheme on the back side of the garden.

Those are plenty of benefits for a plant that grows itself, but allowing stinging nettles anywhere near your garden comes with several serious responsibilities.

•**You must control reseeding.** In late summer, dress in long pants and a long-sleeved shirt and cut the towering 6-foot tall stems down with a scythe or a swing blade. If you don't, you will get a painful surprise when you

discover that some of your spring weeds are stinging nettles.

•**You must pull stragglers.** Several times from spring to fall, the gloves must go on to pull up stinging nettle plants that appear where they are not wanted. The pulled stems with roots attached can be composted, where they will enrich the mix with both [nitrogen](#) and [silicon](#). To be on the safe side, I let pulled plants dry in the sun for a couple of days before I consider them dead enough to compost.

•**No kids allowed.** Our nettles are tucked away in obscure corners where innocent visitors are not likely to be stung, but we still watch children to make sure they stay in the safe zone. But some folks have strange ideas. Two years ago, a beautiful young woman who had found The Goddess in stinging nettles came to pick bare-handed, and wanted her kids to pick, too. What was she thinking? The kids and I made peppermint tea while their mother tingled in the nettles.



Dress Defensively

Gloves, scissors and lots of clothes will protect you from nettles while picking. In the kitchen, handle raw nettles with tongs. Steaming destroys the stinging hairs.



The tiny hairs on *Urtica dioica* stems and leaves are loaded with several chemicals that cause a burning, stinging sensation that can persist for hours. Some of the most popular first aid remedies include rubbing the affected skin with rubbing alcohol or mud. Prevention is better than cure!

Making Nettle Tea

For centuries, many Europeans have made a habit of drinking stinging nettle tea as a rite of spring. An easily made green tea with a slippery mouthfeel, nettle tea is loaded with antioxidants and other nutraceuticals that bring benefits to every system in the body. For two weeks in spring while the nettles are young and tender, a cup of nettle tea each day is like a preseason tune up. The vitamins, lutein, lycopene and iron in nettle tea really can have a restorative effect! If you're taking other drugs and plan to drink a lot of nettle tea, do check [here](#) for possible drug interactions.

<http://www.barbarapleasant.com/stingingnettles.html>