

Common Nettle Fact Sheet

Common Name: Common nettle, also known as stinging nettle

Scientific Name: *Urtica dioica*

German Name: Brennnessel

Attention: Be careful around common nettle, as contact with the leaves and stems causes skin irritation. While the effects are uncomfortable, it is not dangerous. This is the plant's defense mechanism.

Description: The common or stinging nettle is a well-known and highly successful 'weed' species. It is a perennial species, which flowers from June to August and spreads by seeds and by vegetative reproduction via creeping underground rhizomes. The roots are very tough and are yellow in color, and the creeping stems, which often take root at their bases, produce shoots during spring. The oval-shaped leaves are easily recognized; they have deeply serrated edges and bear stinging hairs. These hollow hairs have a similar structure to hypodermic needles, and have a swollen base that contains the acid; an encounter with these leaves is not quickly forgotten. The specific part of the scientific name *dioica* means 'two houses', which refers to the fact that the male and female flowers are found on separate plants. The small whitish flowers are clustered in spikes, which reach up to 10 cm in length.

Size Height: 30 - 250 cm

Leaf length: 4 - 15 cm

Habitat: The common nettle prefers damp soils that are rich in nutrients. It occurs in a broad variety of habitats, such as woods, unmanaged grasslands, scrub, hedgerows, road verges, waste ground, gardens, farmland, fens, and river banks.

Range: Occurs throughout Germany and in temperate parts of Europe and Asia, and has been introduced to many areas outside of this native range. In the United States, we have a native subspecies, *Urtica dioica* subsp. *gracilis* (Ait.) (American stinging nettle) and the introduced subspecies, *Urtica dioica* subsp. *dioica* (European common or stinging nettle).

Ecological Significance: It is one of the most important plants in Europe for invertebrates, and is essential for many of our species of butterflies and moths, including being a host plant for the caterpillars of the beautiful small tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) and peacock (*Inacis io*) butterflies. What is a host plant? For each species in the butterfly kingdom, its larva (caterpillar) can only feed on specific plant species. These specific plant species are referred to as butterfly host plants or caterpillar host plants or butterfly larval plants. One larva's staple is another one's poison. It is not grazed by animals due to the presence of the protective stinging hairs, and so the nettle provides a relatively safe habitat for insects and their larvae. Leaving common nettles in gardens provides habitat for many species of butterflies and moths.

Uses: Humans have put the nettle to various uses; it does not sting when it has been cooked, and can be eaten like spinach or made into nutritious soups. A good green manure for gardening can be made by soaking the leaves in water. During old times, cloth was made from nettles. In Germany the fibers were used to make army uniforms during the First World War when cotton was in short supply. It also has a number of medical uses, such as treatments for arthritis and gout.

Conservation Status: This species is not threatened. Conservation action is not required for this species.

Resource: <http://www.arkive.org/common-nettle/urtica-dioica/>

Website that sells nettle cloth: <http://www.naturstoff.de/shop/Hanf,-Brennnessel-&-Co/Brennnessel/900096/f.html?>



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Sock Garden

Season: May and June

Time required: 20 minutes on the field, then a few months to raise the seed

Material: a few old, colorful socks, magnifying glasses, flower pots, potting soil

Nettles reproduce from seeds, but how do their seeds spread to new locations? Seeds are carried away by the wind and animals. Nettle seeds must easily detach themselves from the flower head by a gust of wind or a touch. Nettles are not the only plants that use this technique.

During late spring, many plants are flowering and releasing their seeds. To make the sock garden, have the children wear old, colorful socks and run through a meadow. The seeds will get caught in their socks. Either on the playground or in the classroom, find the seeds with the help of a magnifying glass. Pluck off the seeds and put them in a flower pot with soil. Make sure to only put a few seeds in each pot so that each plant has enough room to grow. Put your pots in a sunny location. Water your seeds regularly and soon the plants will sprout. What are these plants? Attempts to identify them. Perhaps there is even a nettle!

Plant Defense

Search for plants that defend themselves from predators with thorns, spines, or stinging hairs. Look but don't touch!

What is the name of the plant?

How does it defend itself?

Beneficial Plants

Look in your bathroom for shampoo, conditioner, shower gels, lotion, or other cosmetic products. Check out the labels to see if they contain plant extracts or oils.

What is the name of the plant?

What is the name of the product?

Edible Nettle Soup

1. Harvest the nettle using gloves.
2. Wearing rubber gloves, wash the nettle thoroughly and shake to dry. Pluck the leaves from the stalks.
3. Finely chop the onion and garlic.
4. Using medium heat, melt the butter in a stockpot and add the diced onions. Lightly sauté the onion, then add the nettle leaves into the pot. Lightly sauté the leaves and onion, then add the garlic and vegetable broth. Season with salt and pepper and cover it.
4. Simmer for five minutes and serve.

Ingredients

400 g nettles
1 onion
1 clove garlic
4 cups vegetable stock
1 tbsp. butter
Pinch of salt and pepper

Materials

Gloves
Stockpot
Knife
Cutting board
Measuring cup

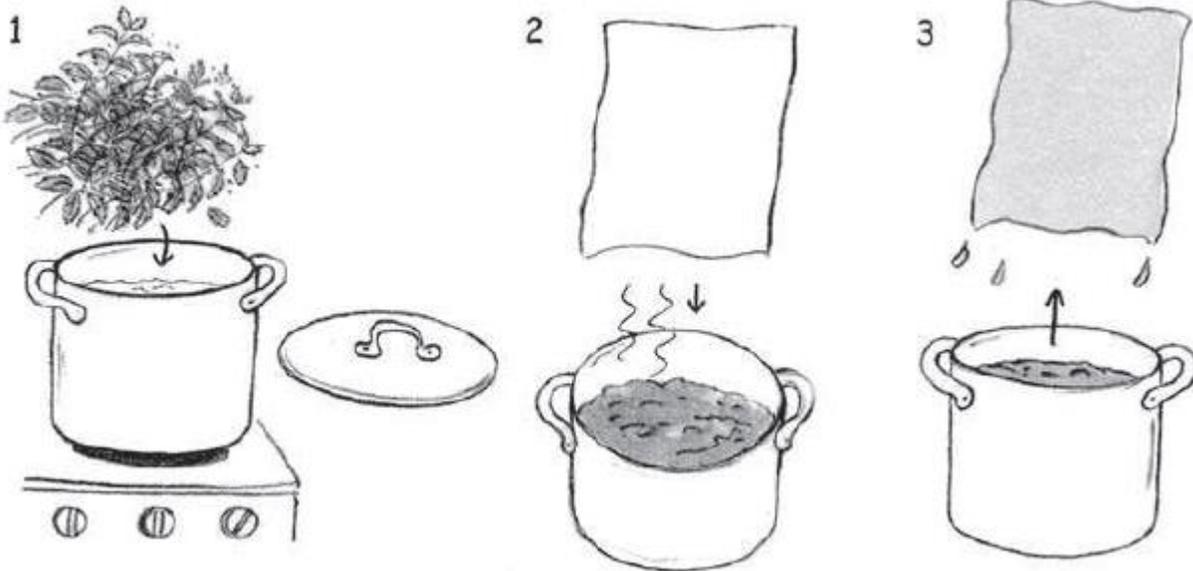
Caterpillar Food

The common nettle is a host plant for the peacock butterfly caterpillar. Draw a picture of a caterpillar on the nettle. Does the nettle provide the caterpillar protection? How?



Nettle Dyed Bandanas

1. Wearing gloves, carefully gather 4 bundles of nettle.
2. Fill a large pot of water and bring to a boil.
3. Add the nettles and carefully stir. Allow nettles to cook for 10 minutes.
4. Take a white bandana and carefully dip it in the water. Dip multiple times for a brighter green.
5. Hang to dry.



Hairy Business

Look at the stinging hairs on the leaves and stems under a microscope. Draw what you see and record your observations.



Details and observations:

