

Seaweed and Eat It

A Family Foraging and Cooking Adventure

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Extract

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STINGING NETTLES

{*Urtica dioica*}

‘The sweetly smelling weed’

There is something slightly rebellious about the nettle: maybe that’s why we like it so much. It is every gardener’s nightmare. But despite all this, it has the audacity to actually taste good and be full of vitamins and trace minerals that are good for you. Of all the green vegetables, including some that we spend hours cultivating in our vegetable gardens or allotments, it is the lowly nettle that comes up trumps on the healthful properties. Nettles have a surprisingly sweet smell and taste, and, in our view, hold up well to any



conventional green vegetable when picked young and fresh. We have found that quickly blanching them in boiling water makes them taste better. During the Second World War, when cultivated vegetables were in short supply, nettles were widely picked and eaten, and it is perhaps because of wartime connotations that eating nettles became such a stigma.

IDENTIFICATION

FIND IT HERE:

Any untended ground – gardens, hedge-rows, woodland – in early spring.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

Nettles are one of the few plants that need little explanation; most of us have been stung by a nettle. It is an upright, coarse perennial that shoots in early spring. The leaves are heart-shaped and have fine hairs that sting.

WHAT CAN IT BE CONFUSED WITH?:

White and red dead nettle. The non-stinging dead nettles can be distinguished by the small pink or white flowers that appear on the stem in springtime, and a square-shaped stem. Dead nettles are also edible, but don't have the depth of flavour of the stinging nettle.



Commonsense tips.

- The shoots must be picked when young and bright green, before the nettles become too tall and start to flower.
- Later, in the spring the leaves turn dark green and their chemical content changes, making them taste bitter.
- Wear gloves when picking nettles – the sting of the leaf lasts until it has been cooked.
- No need to pick the leaves off the stem – the whole young shoot can be used.
- If looking for nettles later in the spring, look in shaded woodland where the shoots may still be young.
- There may be a constant source of young nettles in your local park because the gardeners like to cut nettles to the ground, then the nettles come back in abundance with tasty new shoots and leaves.
- One full carrier bag of nettles is roughly 1lb.

NETTLES TO TICKLE YOUR FANCY MAN

In Shetland, love-struck lassies used nettles to try to win over their man. At Halloween, so the story goes, desperate maidens stole into the bedrooms of their loved ones and placed nettles between the blankets. When the beau went to sleep, he would be 'stung' by the magical properties of the nettles, and 'stung' with love and desire for the maid.

NETTLES FOR YOUR HEALTH

Nettles are the staple of a traditional medicine cabinet and have long been known as a spring tonic, renowned for their ability to fortify, recharge and detoxify the sick, cold-ridden, and winter-weary. Nettles have high levels of vitamins A and C, and are a good tonic for blood.

Nettles are finally making a comeback from weed to superfood – rich in minerals such as calcium, magnesium, iron, and potassium. They have an unusual mineral profile, including manganese, which is a catalyst in the uptake of iron, setting a pattern of absorption, helping the body absorb iron and vitamins more easily.

Nettles and dandelions are also very good at detoxifying the liver, and young nettle and dandelion leaves can be drunk as springtime herbal infusions to rid the body of a winter's worth of build up of liver toxins from all those wild Christmas parties.

Herbalists prescribe nettles to relieve hay fever and allergies because of their anti-inflammatory properties. Nettles also relieve sufferers of other kinds of inflammation: gout, arthritis and rheumatism.

The Romans first introduced us to the nettle cure for rheumatism: their treatment involved alternating hot steam baths with a good self-flagellation with nettles. In true Presbyterian style, miners in Fife, Scotland, cut out the luxurious part of the treatment – the steam bath – and treated their rheumatic aches and pains after a day down the pit by simply thrashing their aching joints with nettles. The same method is still used among indigenous peoples in South America and New Guinea.

Eat nettles to get rid of stiff muscles after rigorous exercise, as they help eliminate toxins that build up in muscle tissue.

REAL MEN EAT NETTLES!

The long-running enmity between the Highlanders and Lowlanders of Scotland even stretched as far as what vegetables they ate. Not only was the weather soft in the Lowlands, so were the people, as seen by their taste in greens.

In the 18th century, the Lowlanders developed a taste for kale, while the Highlanders preferred the common nettle. The Highlanders regarded eating kale as a sign of effeminacy, labelling the Lowlanders 'Kale-eating-girlies'.

COOKING WITH NETTLES

NETTLE GNOCCHI WITH BLUE CHEESE SAUCE

Makes 6–8 servings.

The sight of a table-full of free greens cheers our Scottish hearts, as we mentally calculate the cost of 2lb of organic spinach from the supermarket.

Nettles have a wonderful smell and a sweet, delicate taste that is complemented by the salty blue cheese. We chose Cashel Blue cheese for this sauce, but any cheese will do. If you are feeding it to children, sell it as 'green mac and cheese' substituting a cheddar cheese sauce for the blue cheese. Alternatively, you could eat the gnocchi with a tomato-based sauce.

Make sure you use enough flour to stop the gnocchi sticking, otherwise your hands will end up looking like Shrek's. You don't need to be too precious about how the dumplings look: half the fun is playing with the dough balls and getting messy.

400g/1lb NETTLES (about one full supermarket bag)

1.3kg/3lb POTATOES, PEELED

2 EGGS

½ tsp GRATED NUTMEG

SEA SALT AND FRESHLY GROUND BLACK PEPPER

100–200g/3½–7oz FLOUR

Knob BUTTER

1. Prepare the nettles. There is no need to pick the nettle leaves from the stalks; at this time of year nettles are tender enough to eat whole. Put the gloves on, and put the nettles into a large pan of boiling water for 5–10 minutes. Then immediately drain and rinse the nettles under cold running water to cool as quickly as possible. Then squeeze all excess water out, and finely chop the nettles, either by hand or in a food processor.
2. Cook the potatoes in boiling water for about 15 minutes until tender, drain well then mash thoroughly until as smooth as possible.
3. Combine warm mashed potatoes, eggs, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Add the nettle mixture. Lightly mix together.