

# BEST PRACTICES



## Stinging or Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

Stinging nettle is a common perennial plant growing worldwide and known for its stinging leaves. Reaching up to six feet tall, stinging nettles can grow in both sun or shade but prefer damp soils along streams, forests and meadows. The stinging nettle spreads rapidly through rhizomes, a creeping root system that grows horizontally underground producing new plants. Rhizomal spread, coupled with disturbance, enables stinging nettle to be aggressive and take over, similar to a non-native noxious weed.

The Urticaceae family, the family that stinging nettles belong to, is diverse and vast. Within this family, the plants more closely related to stinging nettle commonly have stems with a square form and jagged or toothed leaves. Both the stems and the leaves are covered with tiny stinging plant hairs. The

stinging hairs, or trichomes, have round tips and when brushed against will break off, revealing needle-like tubes that can pierce the skin. These tubes contain a mix of chemicals including acetylcholine, formic acid, histamine and serotonin. When in contact with skin they cause a burning, itchy and sometimes blistering rash on people and animals.

### Why Stinging Nettle Stings

The stinging mechanism of this plant allows for its survival and spread. It is used to defend itself from large plant eating animals (herbivores) so it is not eaten. Likewise, other plants use these same defenses for propagation and survival. Similar types of plants growing in soils with high concentrations of salt produce salt secreting trichomes while others such as insectivorous plants have trichomes that trap and digest insects. Similarly, thorns found on roses are an outgrowth of such a mechanism also used to deter herbivores from eating them.

### Uses for Stinging Nettle

Stinging nettle is an amazingly versatile plant and has long been used as a food source and medicinal herb. The stem of the plant is very fibrous and can also be used for making rope and textiles. As a food source, once the plant is dried or cooked the stinging hairs are no longer effective and can be eaten. In the spring, the new green sprouts and the older leaves are a source of nutrients including calcium, magnesium and vitamins A, K and C. Dried stinging nettle has been used to treat urinary disorders, allergies and hay fever, diabetes, gout, eczema, dandruff and arthritis.

Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2022

