Urtica dioica

[Synonyms : *Urtica dioica* subsp. *dioica*, *Urtica dioica* var. *vulgaris*, *Urtica galeopsifolia*, *Urtica hispida*, *Urtica major*, *Urtica pubescens*, *Urtica tibetica*]

STINGING NETTLE is a perennial. Native to Asia and Europe (particularly in the south) it has tiny greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Bichu* (Hindi, Punjabi), Bigstring nettle, *Brændenælde* (Danish), *Brandnetel* (Dutch), *Bränässla* (Swedish), *Brennessel* (German), *Brennesle* (Norwegian), Bull nettle, California nettle, Canada nettle, *Chichicaste* (Spanish), Common nettle, Common stinging nettle, *Danadl Poethion* (Welsh), Devil's leaf, Devil's plaything, Edible nettle, Ettle, European nettle, *Gewone Brandnetel* (Afrikaans), *Grande ortica* (Italian), *Grande ortie* (French), Great nettle, Greater nettle, Great stinging nettle, *Grosse Brennessel* (German), *Grote brandnetel* (Dutch), *Hede-nælde* (Danish), Heg-beg, *Hhurrayq* (Arabic), Hidgy-pidgy, Hokey pokey, *Isonokkonen* (Finnish), Jenny nettle, *Knidi* (Greek), *Kopřiva dvoudomá* (Czech), *Krapiva dvudomnaja* (Russian), Naughty man's plaything, Nettle, Nettlewort, *Nokkonen* (Finnish), *Ortchie* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Ortica* (Italian), *Ortica comune* (Italian), *Ortica grande* (Italian), *Ortica maschia* (Italian), *Ortica vivace* (Italian), *Orticone* (Italian), *Ortiga* (Portuguese, Spanish), *Ortiga grande* (Spanish), *Ortiga mayor* (Spanish), *Pokrzywa pospolita* (Polish), *Pokrzywa zwyczajna* (Polish), *Prhľava dvojdomá* (Slovak), *Prhlinka* (Czech), *Qurrays* (Arabic), *Seiyou irakusa* (Japanese), Seven-minute itch, Slender nettle, *Stor nælde* (Danish), *Stornesle* (Norwegian), Tanging nettle, True nettle, *Tsouknidha* (Greek), *Tsouknitha* (Greek), *Tvebo nælde* (Danish), *Urtiga* (Portuguese), *Urtiga-maior* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Urtiga-mansa* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Urtigão* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Urtiga-vermelha* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Urzică* (Rumanian), *Velká kopřiva* (Czech), *Viholainen* (Finnish), *Yi zhu qian ma* (Chinese), *Žahavka* (Czech), *Žíhavka* (Czech), *Žihlava* (Czech), and *Žihlava dvojdomá* (Slovak); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of courage, cruelty, envy, spitefulness, 'you are cruel', and 'you are spiteful'.

The flowers are pollinated by the wind.

Warning – consumption of old plants that have been insufficiently cooked can cause kidney damage. Gloves should be worn when collecting the plant as protection from its bristly hairs. (The leaves and stems are covered in stinging hairs consisting of a very sharp, hollow spine that under pressure will pierce the skin and release juice.) The juice can cause irritation and inflammation for up to 24 hours but the juice can be dissipated by heat. The plant rarely causes problems for animals.

Stinging nettle's strong overall resemblance is its only connection with white dead-nettle (*Lamium album*). The latter is of a different family (*Lamiaceae*), its leaves do not sting and it has a square stem and off-white flowers.

Dioica refers to the male and female flowers growing on separate plants ie. dioecious.

This species of nettle although unpleasant if it touches unprotected skin, is nevertheless far less painful and potent than many other species around the world. The fresh juice from a dock leaf (*Rumex obtusifolius*) [or from sage (*Salvia officinalis*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) or mint (*Mentha*)] can neutralize the sting.

As stinging nettle is native to the more southern parts of Europe and Asia it is likely that the ancient Greeks and the Romans put it to use earlier than more northern countries. For the Jews this is said to be one of the five bitter herbs that they are required to eat during the Feast of Passover.

In the Middle Ages in Europe the plant was used as a strewing herb.

Bronze Age (1900-500 BC) remains show that stinging nettle was being used to make cloth early on (the remains of cremated bones which had been wrapped in nettle cloth were found by archaeologists in a Danish grave) and use of this material continued well into the 20th Century in some European countries. It was still being made in western Austria in 1917 and later still in some of the central European countries east of Poland. The Germanic and Scandinavian nations particularly used the fibre as thread (before the introduction of flax, *Linum*) for weaving varyious qualities of cloth from the finest texture to that required for sailcloth, sacking and cordage. In Scotland the Scottish poet and journalist, Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) noted in one of his letters

> I have slept in nettle sheets, and dined offa nettle table-cloth, and I have heard my mother say that she thought nettle cloth more durable than any other linen.

and nettle fibres were still being used there to make table linen in the 19th Century. An 1832 edition of the *Universal Herbal*, is said to state that nettle fibres make suitable twine for fishing nets.

Nettles are mentioned in several of the plays of the famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) including *Richard II*. When the King lands on the Welsh coast he is overjoyed to have returned and begs the very earth

> .....toads, lie in their way,
> Doing annoyance to the treacherous feet,
> Which with usurping steps do trample thee.
> Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies; .....

Then in Part I of *Henry IV* Hotspur comments on a letter as he reads it aloud

> .....Let me see some more. "The purpose you undertake, is dangerous;" - why, that's certain: 'tis dangerous to take a cold, to sleep, to drink; but I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety. "The purpose you undertake, is dangerous; the friends you have named, uncertain; .....

Nettles are at the centre of the fairytale of *The Wild Swans* written by the celebrated Danish story-teller, Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875). The good and beautiful Princess Elisa silently picks nettles with her bare hands, stamps on them with bare feet, twines the harsh fibres bare-handed into green thread and uses this to make eleven shirts for her brothers – despite all efforts to deter her as she felt compelled to release them from the spell placed on them by their stepmother.

In Germany and Austria during the 1st World War cotton (*Gossypium*) was in short supply and the two countries turned again to stinging nettle and small nettle (*Urtica urens*) for cloth fibre. This was used amongst other things for making army clothing.

Nettle fibre was also used for making paper particularly in France. The fibre is used today still in the manufacture of paper – and also cloth,

This species yields several different coloured dyes including a permanent green wool dye which can be made yellow with an alum mordant. Today it is still a source of chlorophyll (for green dyes).

Several European countries (notably Germany and Belgium) have used the young tops for food. In Scotland nettle pudding [containing nettles, leeks (*Allium ampeloprasum* var. *porrum*)

and broccoli (*Brassica oleracea* var. *italica*)] was eaten by Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), the celebrated English diarist. In his February 1661 diary entry he wrote

> We did eat some nettle porridge, which was made on purpose to-day for some of their coming, and was very good.

Cheesemakers used a decoction of the plant (or its juice) to curdle milk, and the juice was rubbed over the seams of leaky wooden tubs to seal them. Nettles were used to make beer, which was not only said to be a pleasant drink but was also believed to be able to ease the pain of gout or rheumatism.

The old herbalists thought nettle juice could stimulate hair growth and nettles were used in hair lotions and tonics. A 17th Century Englishman, Gervaise Markham, made a commercial skin lotion which included nettle amongst its ingredients. Today the plant can be a commercial ingredient in toiletries such as shampoos and hair conditioners.

Dried nettles provided cattle fodder (particularly in Sweden and Russia) and when powdered finely they were used to fatten poultry. In both Egypt and the Netherlands horse dealers were convinced that nettles as part of a horse's diet contributed to a sleek coat. Stinging nettles also provide food for the caterpillars of many beautiful butterflies including the map butterfly, the peacock, the red admiral and the tortoiseshell.

In Russia peasants used the nettle to colour eggs yellow on Maundy Thursday. Today in the Ukraine eggs are decorated with batik designs at Easter using a nettle dye, and a green confectionery dye can also be obtained with the plant.

In ancient Egypt a burning oil was extracted from the seeds.

Superstitions and customs involving stinging nettle are many and diverse. Stinging nettle with chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), crab apple (*Malus baccata*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*), greater plantain (*Plantago major*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) and wood betony (*Stachys officinalis*) was one of the Nine Sacred Herbs for the Anglo-Saxons. They believed these plants could give protection against evil. In later centuries in English Yorkshire the stinging nettle played a role in exorcism (of the devil). In some parts of Britain it was believed that frogs could be kept away from beehives if a bunch of the nettle was hung nearby – and that nettle acted as a similar repellent for flies in the larder. Several customs were associated with illness. A child's poor eyesight could be cured if you blew into the eye through a hole in the leaf. Fever could be cured if a stinging nettle (preferably growing in shade) was firmly grasped and uprooted while intoning the name of the sufferer and that of his or her parents.

Once stinging nettle became established in North America it got caught up in the ceremonial ritual of several Indian tribes there including the Okanagan-Colville. It also featured in Makah whaling and fishing rituals – and Iroquois Indians included it as an ingredient in some witchcraft potions.

The plant was used to make a hair tonic by the Kwakiutl and Thompson tribes, and Nitinaht fishermen rubbed it on their hands and their fishing lines to remove human smell. Makah fishermen on the other hand put it on their lines to dye them green in order to make them less obtrusive. Cherokee hunters twisted stems together for bowstrings.

Stinging nettle fibre was in much demand. The Makah used it for basketry and string and some of the Dakota turned the stems into cordage. Nitinaht Indians mixed the fibre with that of other plants to produce strong rope (and fish and duck nets) – apart from using it alone for twine and sewing thread. The Hesquiat tribe produced their herring nets, ropes and twine from the stems, but Thompson Indians preferred to use the plant tops from which they made scoop nets for fishing, as well as twine and fine thread.

While the Mohican, Thompson, Iroquois, Makah and Okanagan-Colville Indians all ate the plant as a cooked vegetable, the Shuswap used it to produce a beverage.

Stinging nettle also provided North American Indian tribes with treatments for various medical conditions – although records suggest that its must popular use was probably in the treatment of rheumatism for which it was employed by at least the Okanagan-Colville, Hesquiat, some of the Paiute, the Nitinaht, some of the Kwakiutl, the Shuswap and the Thompson tribes. Both Hesquiat and Kwakiutl Indians used it to treat pain – although as this usually involved rubbing the affected area with the nettles one wonders whether the 'cure' may have been a matter of replacing one pain with another. Hesquiat, some of the Dakota and the Cherokee Indians used it to treat stomach upsets, and the Cherokee also prescribed it for fever. The plant was used by the Makah, some of the Cree and also the Kwakiutl tribes for childbirth, and the Kwakiutl turned to it as a remedy for venereal diseases too. Thompson Indians employed it in the treatment of piles, and some of the Paiute tribe applied it to various skin disorders. For the Nitinaht it offered a tonic, while the Makah Indians used it to make a stimulant.

Medicinally, herbalists prescribed stinging nettle as a tonic prescribed stinging nettle as a tonic that would enrich the blood and this was referred to in one of the old cries of the London street sellers. Nettle tea was also recommended for a variety of ailments including throat infections (in the form of a gargle), asthma, bronchitis, diabetes, gout, rheumatism – and nettle-rash. Stinging nettle's healing properties were used for such external problems as the treatment of skin ailments generally, wounds (including stemming bleeding), dog bites and any stings, and they were also used to stop nosebleeds. In India a decoction of the plant has been employed to treat kidney disorders, tuberculosis and jaundice. Today nettle can be used to treat haemorrhages and skin complaints such as eczema, and it is also used in homoeopathic treatments. The plant is a rich source of beta-carotene and Vitamin A. It is understood that the American Cancer Society believes that a diet consisting of a high content of plants that contain beta-carotene could be able to assist in reducing the risk of contracting some forms of cancer.

It is the birthday flower for 31st October.