Stinging Nettle

Urtica dioica

Nettle is a plant that’s easy to overlook, unless you happen to brush against it, but it is a nutritional and medicinal marvel. There are two types of nettle that grow in our area: stinging and wood (Laportea canadensis). While they’re somewhat similar in appearance, they can be told apart without too much difficulty – the wood nettle has wider leaves with finer teeth, and in my opinion a more powerful sting. I do not know of any substantiated uses for wood nettle, though it won’t poison you either. Horse balm and false nettle both also look similar, but neither of them will sting. Yes, I always run my arm along the plant; initially to double-check identification, but now more as a way to connect with the plant before harvesting it for use.

Stinging nettle is extremely rich in nutrients, including magnesium, iron – with the added bonus of helping the body to utilize any iron it takes in – and more protein than any other plant. It is practically a multivitamin on its own when made into a strong infusion (one ounce dried herb steeped overnight in 1 quart of hot water) and drunk regularly. However, it is a moderate diuretic, and for those with drier constitutions it can be somewhat irritating. In this case it combines well with other nutritive herbs such as red clover, violet, mallow, and oat straw. It’s also delicious as a food. It can be eaten raw if you crush it up first, but I prefer it sautéed with lemon and garlic, or added to sauces, omelets, soups, etc. I’ve also had good results mixing it ½ and ½ with spinach to make spanakopita, and with basil and/or garlic mustard to make pesto. Any kind of trauma to the leaf – cooking, drying, crushing – will destroy the sting.

Medicinally, it stands out as a restorative tonic for the nervous system and adrenals. Most of us these days spend far too much of our time in sympathetic nervous system dominance, or fight-or-flight mode. Eventually this wears down our adrenal glands and inhibits proper digestion, leading us to feel exhausted and keyed-up at the same time on a regular basis. Nettle helps to shift us back toward parasympathetic, or rest-and-digest mode, as well as directly nourishing our adrenals and nerves. The upshot is that we actually often have more energy, and the ability to focus it in a useful direction. Some herbalists believe that a fresh leaf tincture is the best way to tap into this property, while a few others have used the seeds eaten plain or as a tincture. I think that the nourishing aspect is best utilized as tea or food, since alcohol is a poor medium for extracting minerals.

The seeds have been more notably employed as a trophorestorative for the kidneys. This is a fairly new use, introduced by David Winston after nettle suggested it to him (that’s right), but there are a number of case studies showing that it has helped restore kidney function and keep people off of dialysis, or even let them get off of it once they’d begun. It is, in any case, beneficial to the urinary system, helping to tone the internal tissues and clear uric acid from the system. It’s a good tonic for those with recurring UTIs as well as gout or arthritis. It’s also toning and nourishing to both the male and female reproductive sytems. The leaf makes a good uterine tonic, particularly when combined with raspberry leaf, and the roots (harvested in the fall after seeding) are used to treat benign prostatic hypertrophy.

It is, in fact, beneficial to the metabolism as a whole, strengthening the liver and balancing metabolic functions. It can be useful in addressing issues such as acne, psoriasis, and eczema, which are believed to stem from inefficient waste clearance. For this, it would be helpful to add burdock, dandelion, and or yellow dock. Taken all together, Nettle is both alterative and adaptogenic (a word most commonly applied to exotic plants like ginseng and ashwaganda), and it grows right here in our own backyard.

Even the infamous sting of this plant has medicinal merit. A technique known as “urtication” – or “nettle flogging” by some more modern herbalists – has traditionally been used to treat arthritis, paralysis, tendinitis, and other nerve- or inflammation-related ailments by whacking the appropriate body parts with fresh nettles. Though this may not be the first thing you’d want to try, it has been proven effective in a number of cases. One theory is that it both stimulates circulation and “jump start” the electrochemical action of the nerves. Combined with both internal and external use of St. John’s wort (specific for injured nerves), it may be worth exploring in cases of nerve damage or degeneration.

