

MOTHER NATURE'S CHEMICAL WEAPONS STINGING NETTLE



Stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*) are broadleaf, perennial weeds.

Identification of Stinging Nettles:

Although they can reach greater heights, stinging nettles generally grow about 3 - 4 feet high. They also often grow in masses, forming a monoculture. If you see a group of such plants (see photo above right), look for those noxious bristly hairs along the stems of stinging nettles and on the undersides of their leaves. Stinging nettles spread via rhizomes.



Where Stinging Nettles Grow:

Stinging nettles are found in disturbed soils and can be encountered on roadsides. But because they prefer nitrogen-rich soils, their favorite habitat is garden borders. The Ohio Perennial and Biennial Weed Guide speaks of two varieties (which are very similar to each other), one a North American native, the other indigenous to Europe.



Why Stinging Nettles Burn -- And a Home Remedy:

Of stinging nettles' capacity to cause skin irritation, the Ohio Perennial and Biennial Weed Guide remarks, "Toxins thought to be involved include formic acid (also found in ants), histamine, acetylcholine and 5-hydroxytryptamine." A weed that often grows near, stinging nettles, yellow dock, can be used as a home remedy to counteract their toxicity. I would describe the symptoms resulting from an encounter with stinging nettles as mainly a burning sensation just after contact, followed by an itchy rash.

Stinging Nettles Not the Same as "Deadnettle":

Don't confuse stinging nettles with dead nettle (deadnettle), a harmless perennial plant used in shade gardens.

Origin of the Names, "Stinging Nettles," "Urtica Dioica":

The genus name for stinging nettles, *Urtica*, comes from the Latin root for "burn" -- a reference to the burning skin irritation caused by contact with stinging nettles. The species name, *dioica*, meanwhile, is from the Greek for "two houses" and refers to the fact that male and female flowers appear on separate stinging nettle plants; other so-called "dioecious" plants include winterberry shrub.



Close-up of nettles on plant stem

As for the origin of the common name, "stinging nettles," the foregoing explains the first half of the name. The origin of the second half, "nettles," is explained by the term's Indo-European root, *ned*, meaning to "bind" or "tie." For besides culinary and medicinal uses, another of the ancient uses to which nettles were put was as a source of fiber for clothing and rope.



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