

The great virtues of the common nettle

Text by Simone Collet

"Whoever rubs against it gets stung" states the proverb. And yet, the common nettle has a large number of assets

Each of us can find, in the depth of our memory, the painful remembrance of an unfortunate fall in a patch of stinging nettles and the terrible stinging that instantly affected whole areas of our skin!



Fortunately, the burning itch does not last long; and this little loved plant has more merit than one might think. Indeed, its assets exceed its modest appearance, especially in the area of nutrition.

In spring and autumn, the leaves of young nettles that have not yet flowered are rich in antioxidants and have a high content of vitamins E and C, especially C. On a weight-for-weight basis, they contain three to four times more vitamin C than an orange! They are also rich in precious minerals such as magnesium, zinc, calcium and especially iron, a key element in the fight against anaemia. In addition, nettles eliminate the toxins at the origin of acne and other skin disease.

Nettles and famine

The nutritious qualities of the nettle plant helped the alpine population to survive the last great famine that struck Switzerland in the early 19th century.

In 1815, the eruption of the Tambora volcano in Indonesia released an amount of energy equivalent to 170,000 atomic bombs from Hiroshima. This disaster killed 90,000 people in the area and, in the years that followed, claimed thousands more victims in Europe and Switzerland.

The ashes from this eruption rose to an altitude of 30 km and circled the earth, obscuring the sky and causing a drop in temperature of -2.4° C in the northern hemisphere.

Summers without sunshine destroyed the crops. To survive, people had to eat grass and nettles. In mountainous areas, people sought them in the most

inaccessible locations, on the edges of cliffs, at the bottom of ravines, etc. A good number of people lost their lives for a handful of nettles

The benefits of the common nettle

Nowadays, nettle lovers find these plants readily along paths and rivers, in abandoned fields and on the edge of a forest where they enjoy favourable growing conditions.



The whole plant should be picked and the fresh upper leaves removed at home. As a precaution, avoid leaves in the lower part of the plant that can be soiled by animal dung and nettles that grow on roadsides or near fields treated with chemicals.

Nettles can be eaten by cooking the leaves like spinach. You can make soup, salad, pies, even herbal tea. It is often found in the beauty products section of specialised stores.

The nettle strategy

The reason that nettles so bitinglly sanction those foolhardy enough to come into contact with it, is because it has developed an effective defence against the greed of herbivores and insects.

Its stinging trichome hairs inject histamine into the skin of someone who rubs against them, which introduces penetrating acids under the skin. The intense burning sensation that follows causes intruders to instantly flee! To defend against insects, nettles grow a bristling fur on their leaves that is visible to the naked eye, preserving the plant's vessels and preventing the predators from reaching its sap.

Picked in the wild, the common nettle costs less than a radish! The plant's sophisticated strategies can do nothing against a wise gardener: just put on gloves, get a pair of scissors and go pick a goodly load. There is no lingering danger of stings: as soon as it is picked, the nettle loses its sting. Knowing this, why abstain?

Good recipes

1818 Nettle soup

Harvest an armful of nettles.

Remove and wash the tender leaves.

Heat two tablespoons of oil in a pot.

Slowly cook a sliced onion on low heat.

Add 4 peeled potatoes cut into cubes.

Add the nettle leaves.

Cover with water, salt and pepper.

Bring to a boil and simmer on low heat for 30 minutes.

The 2018 variant

Mix the vegetables, then add 3/4 of a cup of cream (100 – 200 ml)

Heat up and enjoy.

Steamed nettles

Mince an onion.

Chop up a clove of garlic

Melt a knob of butter in a frying pan

Cook the garlic and onion over low heat

Add the cleaned nettle leaves and fry them for 10 minutes

Serve with fried potatoes.

