

Spring Zinger

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It's been used to treat hay fever and arthritis, coagulate cheese, add vitamins and minerals to the diet, improve egg production in chickens, spin and weave into cordage, nets and fine cloth, and even to make beer. Few plants can claim the versatility of stinging nettle - a Northwest native most people think of, if at all, as a rather vicious weed.

But while many Pacific Northwesterners today know stinging nettle by painful experience as a plant to avoid, herbalists and wild foragers view it in its historical perspective; as a favorite spring green, rich in vitamins and minerals. In fact, it is richer in nutrients than many cultivated garden greens, including spinach.



Herbalist Jo Powell discusses the health properties of native stinging nettles, which are rich in many nutrients.

Chrissy Ragulsky/News-Register

Before the advent of global shipping, refrigeration and other luxuries, spring greens brought a welcome and important supplement to the diet.

"(Through the winter), you'd been eating stored things; lard, meat, roots, waxed eggs," herbalist Jo Powell said. The first spring greens were welcomed in part for their variety and in part for the additional nutrients they offered, including vitamin C. And, Powell, said, "they help to get the digestive juices flowing."

Powell runs "The Northwest School of Herbalism," in Dayton, with her partner Ken Nelly, and often forages for wild foods and herbs. Nettle is a particular favorite; she likes to dry it for use in tea year-round.

"Why spend money on vitamins and supplements you have to buy when you can forage - if you know how - and make tea with this year-round, and use that for a supplement?" Powell said. Nettles are rich in beta carotene, Vitamin C, Vitamin K, calcium, phosphorus, iron and other minerals, she said.

Many American Indian tribes also used nettle for both a cooked vegetable and source of fiber.

Although today winter diets are far more varied than in the past - and in western Oregon it is possible to grow greens year-round - tender, early spring greens remain a special treat.

Nettles are among an abundance of wild foods, some naturalized, some native, that can be and historically were used to round out the diet, given proper identification and knowledge of safety factors. The list includes miner's lettuce, dandelion, cleavers and chickweed, along with numerous others.

Not all can just be rinsed and tossed into the salad bowl, however. Nettles, as mentioned in the name, sting - and should only be eaten before they begin flowering. Cleavers have irritating sticky and scratchy hairs. Both are normally steamed or boiled and used like spinach. Typically, the leaves and sometimes the upper stem are the part eaten; it's easiest to chop them after cooking to avoid being stung.

Nettles are also often dried and used in tea or soup broths throughout the year. Once dried they usually - not always - lose much of their ability to sting.

Found in most countries around the world, they've been prized for a range of uses throughout history. Nettles were used extensively in Europe for weaving cloth as well as rope and nets for millennia before eventually being replaced by flax and cotton. It made a comeback in Germany and Austria during World War I, for use in military uniforms, during cotton shortages. A Swiss company is now exploring making use of nettle fiber in modern clothing.

To pick your own, Powell said, it's important to be absolutely sure the plant is correctly identified, and to look for large, healthy stands that can withstand some picking. Don't take more than a small percentage of any stand, and spread the harvest evenly over the site.

Wearing gloves, cut nettles to the ground in early spring, when they are 6 to 8 inches tall. The harvest won't kill the plants; like pruning, it may actually cause them to become bushier and stockier. Look for healthy plants, Powell said.

"You don't want something with a lot of bug holes, that looks like it's been beat up," she said. "Just like in your garden; you want what's most vibrant."

Use tongs or wooden spoons to rinse the gathering nettles thoroughly. They can be patted - carefully - in a towel, or spun in a salad spinner before briefly storing in the refrigerator, or cooking or drying. To steam, leave the water on the leaves.

For more information, and a historic recipe for nettle beer, visit the Botanical.Com website; www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/n/nettle03.html.

For more information about Powell's herb classes, visit her website at www.nwherbs.com.

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