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Welcome sign of spring

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By Alex Féthière



Nettles emerging in spring. *(Alex Féthière)*

Nettles are a welcome sign of spring in my gardens and woods. Do those who curse their sting know all the wondrous uses of this vegetal gift?

I don't profess to know all they offer - as with most topics I am continually learning. I have been eating nettles for years (they make a great pesto) and prefer them to most greens for their taste and nutrition, and only in reading for this column did I find that yarn is made from certain nettle species' fibers.

That's not surprising, considering the storied military canvas known as "salt and pepper." This midcentury heavy duck was made in Switzerland from cotton and nettle fibers, and was most famously used in backpacks.

Once cooked or bruised, nettles' needles are harmless. Steaming the greens or whizzing them in a food processor is enough to neutralize the sting, which comes from little needles made of silica called trichomes. These deliver chemicals including the formic acid that gives ant bites their zap.

Nutritionally speaking, nettles are a powerhouse. One cup typically contains almost half of one's calcium needs for a day, and significant potassium, fiber, magnesium and protein. Their upright posture and needles owe their stiffness to silica, of which nettles are no trifling source.

Nettles also have many medicinal uses. A potent anti-inflammatory, it has shown effects when ingested or applied topically. Osteoarthritis sufferers have stung themselves near affected joints for relief in a practice called urtication. Urtication has also been used by everyone from indigenous tribes to Caesar's troops to stay awake and focused.

Men with enlarged prostates have taken stinging nettle root to ease symptoms. It has been used to treat urinary tract infections and to cleanse the blood, improving eczema and acne breakouts.

Picking only leaves from the top two to three sets when the plant is 1 foot tall is a sustainable practice that respects wild populations. Pinching leaves will cause them to bush and form more leaves, from which a second harvest can be taken.

Wear gloves when harvesting, and be careful of the topmost young leaves on each plant. It's not unusual to find spiders or caterpillars cocooning in them.

Because nettles bioaccumulate heavy metals, it's best to finish harvesting them once they start flowering, and leave them alone completely when they are setting seed - unless you're whacking them with a stick to help the seeds spread.

Nettle manure is yet another application for this valuable plant. If I'm uncertain that the soil in an area is free of contaminants, I use them only for fertilizer.

Biodynamic practitioner Maria Thun recommends making a nettle manure from 2 pounds of fresh nettles rotted in an enamel container with 10 quarts of water. One to four weeks later, when the leaves have decayed, this liquid should be strained and diluted 1:9 for fine spraying on soil or 1:40 for watering.

This preparation is said to help with molds, pests and growth delays caused by cold weather, and is particularly effective on roses, potatoes, currant bushes, fruit trees, tomatoes, cucumbers, spinach and cabbage. Mason County abounds in nettles and the conditions from which nettles can relieve us - plants and people alike.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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