

Wild Edibles: Stinging Nettle

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Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is a delicious and nutritious food. But it's also a plant that can sting and cause welts. With these tips, you can learn how to safely gather, prepare and preserve this wild edible.

Native Indigenous peoples have gathered stinging nettles since time immemorial. They can be used medicinally, ceremonially and as a highly nutritious food source. Roots, seeds, stems and young, tender leaves are all edible.



Native Indigenous people use stinging nettle for medicine, ceremony and as a food source.

Credit: Danita Macy, © Oregon State University

Mature fibrous stems have been used to make rope, cloth and fishing net. These skills, taught around the world for centuries, are now being revitalized.

Stinging nettles provide important habitat and food for wildlife. Butterflies such as the small tortoiseshell lay their eggs on the undersides of nettle leaves. Once the eggs hatch, the larvae feed on the leaves of the nettle plant.

Nettles also teach us. In many Indigenous cultures, the sting is considered a gracious reminder to always be aware — to pay attention to our surroundings.

Stinging nettle is often referred to as a perennial herb, and in some cultures, as a vegetable due to its high nutritional content. Like many vegetable greens, nettles are slightly bitter. A half-cup serving of blanched or cooked nettles is a good source of fiber that promotes good digestion. Nettles also contain calcium and manganese, which promote bone health. Lutein and zeaxanthin found in nettles contribute to better vision and eye health as we age.

Nettles are commonly used in soups, seasoning, teas and pesto. After proper preparation, substitute nettle leaves in almost any recipe that uses spinach or kale as an ingredient. You can preserve nettles for future use by freezing or drying them.

Growing nettles

Nettles are found wild in many places around the world, on moist forest floors and riverbanks. They are easy to grow in your backyard or in containers. Nettles reproduce via seed and rhizomes. You can buy nettle seed online or grow it from starts.

Gathering nettles carefully and respectfully

Caution: *The tiny hairs found on stinging nettles, called trichomes, contain chemicals that produce a stinging sensation on the skin that can last for hours or cause blisters. Safe gathering practices can protect you from stings. Dry or blanch nettles before use to make them safe to eat.*

Wear long sleeves, long pants and long rubber kitchen gloves when gathering nettles. Use sharp scissors to clip stems and leaves. Place nettles in a paper bag, basket or other breathable container.

Nettles are best to eat or preserve when tender. Gather them early in the morning in early spring, before the plant flowers. For less bitterness, choose leaves that are no larger than 3 inches wide from plants no taller than 3 feet. Clip right above the node at an angle so the stem does not become waterlogged. Once flowers appear, greens become tough, with a less desirable taste.

When gathering nettles, remember to take **only** what you need. Don't dig them up and remove them from the soil. Reflect on the people and animals that come after you. This will allow the patch to grow strong.

Blanching nettles

Blanching cleans and softens food. This process destroys the tiny hairs, or trichomes, allowing you to safely eat nettles. Blanching also destroys enzymes that make vegetables deteriorate and keeps them from browning, becoming bitter or developing off flavors. Blanching keeps colors bright and makes it easier to hydrate food later. About 4 to 5 cups of fresh nettles will make about 1 cup blanched nettles.

Water blanching

Fill a kettle with enough water to cover the food. Bring the water to a rolling boil. Wearing gloves, gradually stir in the food, keeping the water boiling. Cover the kettle tightly and boil for 1½ to 2 minutes. Remove nettles and quickly place in an ice bath for 1 minute. Drain, place nettles between two towels and roll up tightly. Reuse the water to blanch again, adding more water as necessary.

Freezing nettles

Wear long sleeves and long rubber kitchen gloves.

- Rinse. Water blanch for 1½ to 2 minutes. Drain.
- Place leaves and stems in a single layer on a flat tray. Place in freezer. When frozen, place in airtight containers for freezer storage. Label and date.
- If freezing using ice cube trays, place blanched nettles in individual cubes ¾ full. Add water to cover. After cubes are frozen solid, remove them from the tray and place them in airtight freezer bags or containers. Label and date. Best to use within 1 year.

Source: *Freezing Fruits and Vegetables*, (<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/pnw214>) PNW 214, Oregon State University Extension.

Drying nettles

Wear long sleeves and long rubber kitchen gloves.

- Rinse. Drain.
- Spread in a single layer on a drying tray using tongs. Dry at 95° to 115° F until crisp.
- Store in airtight bags or containers in a dark and cool location. Label and date.
- Dried herbs are best to use within 6 months or placed in freezer up to 1 year.

Source: *Drying Fruits and Vegetables*, (<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/pnw397>) PNW 397, Oregon State University Extension.

Nettle recipes

Nettle tea



Rinse leaves and prepare for dehydration.

Credit: Danita Macy, © Oregon State University



Dry at 95°–115°F until crisp.

Credit: Danita Macy, © Oregon State University



Crumble the dried leaves. Store them in a jar.

Credit: Danita Macy, © Oregon State University



Store nettle tea in a pitcher of your choice.

Credit: Danita Macy, © Oregon State University

Nettle pesto

Keep food safety in mind when storing vegetables and herbs in oil. These low-acid foods can be a source of *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria, which are found in soil, water and air. Oil's oxygen-free environment above 40°F is perfect for growth of the bacteria that can cause botulism, a very dangerous type of food poisoning. Store in the refrigerator for up to 4 days or freeze.

Ingredients

- 2 cups blanched nettles, or combine 1 cup fresh basil leaves and 1 cup blanched nettles
- ½ cup walnuts or pine nuts, toasted
- 2 to 3 garlic cloves, peeled
- ¾ cup olive oil
- ¾ cup parmesan or pecorino Romano
- Salt and pepper to taste
- ¼ teaspoon crushed red pepper
- Fresh lemon juice to taste

Directions

- Bring 1 gallon water and pinch of salt to a rolling boil. Add nettle leaves. Boil 1½ to 2 minutes. Using tongs, remove blanched nettles from pot and place in an ice bath. Allow nettles to set in iced water for 2 minutes. Drain. When cooled, squeeze to remove excess water.
- In a food processor, high-speed blender or large pestle and mortar, pulse or blend until finely minced: nettles, garlic cloves, toasted nuts, crushed red pepper, salt and black pepper. Use a spatula to scrape down sides. Slowly add ½ cup oil while mixing. If you prefer a thinner pesto, add remaining oil to desired consistency. Add cheese until just blended. Add lemon juice to taste.

Store pesto in the refrigerator (label and date) and use within 4 days *OR* freeze in ice cube trays until solid. Then place in freezer-safe bags or containers (label and date) up to a year. Thaw in refrigerator before use. Use thawed pesto within 4 days.

Source: [Herbs and Vegetables in Oil](https://extension.oregonstate.edu/food/preservation/herbs-vegetables-oil-sp-50-701), (<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/food/preservation/herbs-vegetables-oil-sp-50-701>) SP 50-701, Oregon State University Extension Service

Nettle quiche

Yield: 6 servings

Ingredients

- 3 slices bread, cubed
- 4 eggs
- 1½ cup milk
- ½ teaspoon each of salt, pepper and ground mustard
- 1 cup blanched, drained nettles, coarsely chopped. (If frozen, thaw in refrigerator and drain.)
- ¼ cup sliced green onion or chives
- ¾ cup smoked salmon or sausage, crumbled, browned and drained
- ¼ cup shredded cheddar cheese

Directions

Heat oven to 350°F. Grease 9-inch pie pan or use cooking oil spray. In a bowl, whisk eggs, milk, salt, pepper and mustard. Stir in nettles and onion; set aside.

Cube bread; spread evenly in pie pan. Add bits of fish or sausage among the bread cubes. Slowly pour egg mixture over the ingredients in the pie pan. Adjust for even distribution of nettles, if needed. Sprinkle with cheese.

Put pie pan on a baking sheet. Bake uncovered on lower oven rack for about 40 to 45 minutes, or until a knife inserted near the center comes out clean. Quiche will puff up while cooking. Wedges can be served hot or cold. Chill leftovers within 2 hours.

Nettle soup

Yield: 5 to 6 cups

Ingredients

- 2 to 3 tablespoons oil or butter
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 to 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 pound potatoes (any kind) peeled and diced
- Salt and pepper to taste
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 cups blanched nettles (2 pounds before blanching)
- 4 cups broth, any type
- ½ to 1 cup heavy cream (optional for a creamy soup)

Directions

In a large pot over medium heat, add oil and sauté onions until clear and starting to brown, about 3 to 4 minutes. Add minced garlic. Stir. Add diced potatoes, broth, salt, pepper and red pepper flakes. Lower heat. Cook until potatoes are soft. Add blanched nettles and cook for an additional 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Allow to cool for 10 minutes before placing in blender.

Add ½ cup cream to blender if a creamy soup is desired. Blend to desired consistency, adding additional cream (optional) if needed.

Nettle tortillas

Yield: 15 tortillas

Ingredients

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup blanched stinging nettle puree (see instructions for blanching nettles)
- 5 Tablespoons butter or shortening OR 1/3 cup oil (olive or vegetable)

Directions

In a medium-sized bowl mix together flour, baking powder and salt. Add butter, shortening or oil. Blend with either hands or a pastry blender until all fat is worked in the dough.

Add pureed blanched nettles, mix into a soft dough. Start with 1/4 cup of the puree. Add more if needed. Knead for a few minutes. Allow to set covered with a moist towel in bowl for 15 to 20 minutes.

Divide dough into 15 equal size balls. Before rolling out, flatten with the palm of your hand. On a floured surface, roll out dough from the center using a rolling pin making 6 to 8 inch tortillas rounds. You can also use a tortilla press.

Place on heated skillet or griddle. Cook on both sides. When you see bubbling or small brown spots, the tortilla is done. Stack on plate; keep covered with towel or foil until ready to serve OR store in refrigerator up to 4 days in plastic wrap or in zippy-style freezer bags for up to 6 months (allow to thaw in refrigerator and reheat in skillet).

Nettle wonton ravioli

Makes approximately 12–14 ravioli

Ingredients

- 4 cups fresh = 1 cup sautéed nettles
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ cup shredded parmesan cheese*
- ⅓ cup ricotta cheese*
- ¼ cup olive oil
- Zest of one lemon
- ½ package of wonton wrappers
- Parsley for garnish
- Red pepper flakes (optional)

**For a dairy-free option, substitute pine nuts for cheese.*

Directions

In a colander, rinse nettles well to remove any dirt or tiny bugs. Set on paper towels to dry.

Heat olive oil in skillet over medium heat. Add minced garlic. Use kitchen tongs to fully coat nettles in oil. Cook, tossing nettles in oil 4–5 minutes, until fully wilted like spinach. Remove from pan and place on cutting board. Leave any remaining oil in pan and set aside. Chop nettles with a large knife or food processor. Place in bowl. Add cheese, salt, pepper and zest of lemon over nettles. Mix well.

Lay a wonton wrapper down and wet all four edges of wrapper. Add 1 heaping tablespoon of nettle mixture in center of wrapper. Add another wonton wrapper directly on top. Press out any air bubbles and pinch edges closed with fork.

Bring a pan of water to boil, and add 2–3 raviolis. Boil for 2–3 minutes or until they return to the surface. Remove with slotted spoon and return to skillet. Toss in pan to lightly coat with oil. Add a little extra oil if needed. Sprinkle red pepper flakes and parmesan to taste.

Place on plate and garnish with parsley. Refrigerate any extras within 2 hours.

Source: Jennie Brixey, program specialist, Multnomah County Health Department

Resources

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