

## Working with stinging nettles

*Urtica dioica* is the common nettle, also known as the stinging nettle. There are 6 subspecies and 5 of these have the sting. The upper leaves and stem have long sharp and hollow hairs on them called



*trichomes*. They hold a poison containing histamine and a cocktail of other chemicals, which is a defence against being eaten by herbivores. The lower leaves are free of the trichomes.

Documents from Saxon times show the nettle to be a lactative, an arthritis remedy and a source of fibre for making cord. In modern times, the medical applications derived from this plant are extensive. Ancient herbalists have probably used stinging nettles since Mesolithic times.

### Cordage.

Take a full length mature stinging nettle plant by the base of the stem and pull it out of the ground, taking care not to touch the leaves. Turn the nettle upside down and hold with one hand. With your other hand, place the thumb and forefinger around the stem near the root forming a tight circle. Quickly pull that hand downwards, forcing off the leaves from the stem. If you only come into contact with the bottom of the leaves you will not be stung. The stem can now be dried and crushed to split the fibres, then rolled into thin cord. Several strands can be twisted together into thicker cord.

### Cooking.

Only use fresh nettles, the older plants have a stronger flavour. Take a short length of stinging nettle and swish it in water to remove any bits and bugs. Toast on a hot griddle to degrade the poison in the leaves. The leaves can then be removed from the plant without fear of stinging, and broken up to be used as a medication or food flavouring.



By toasting the nettle leaves, most of the nutrient value of the plant is retained. If the nettles are



boiled to make them edible, the water should be consumed as it will contain all of the water soluble nutrients and vitamins.

Nettles are rich in the vitamins A and C; they also contain iron, calcium, potassium and manganese.

**Caution:** Once the nettles start to flower, the chemistry changes and if eaten they can affect the urethra with cystitis like symptoms.