

What's in a name?

Nettle is also known as Devil's Plaything, Hokey-pokey and Jinny Nettle because of its association with the nettle rash (urticarial). The word 'nettle' also appears in many village names like Nettlebed (Oxfordshire), Nettlecombe (Dorset) and Nettleton (Lincolnshire).

The Latin for the nettle plant is 'dioica'. It means 'two houses' and it refers to the fact that the male and female flowers are carried on separate plants. It is also believed that the term 'nettle' is derived from the old English for needle in reference to the stinging leaves.



Botany & Ecology

If it is left growing, the plant reaches the height of 1 to 2m (3ft to 7ft) in the summer but it dies back after the first frosts or a cold snap. It spreads by seed and via the underground rhizomes. The leaves and stems are very hairy, which bear many stinging hairs. The tips come off when touched, transforming the hair into a needle. These needles inject acetylcholine, histamine, 5-HT (serotonin), moroidin, leukotrienes, and possibly formic acid. This mixture of chemical compounds causes the painful sting.

Nettles are the exclusive larval food plant for several species of butterfly, such as the Peacock or the Small Tortoiseshell, and are also eaten by the larvae of some moths including Angle Shades, Buff Ermine and Dot Moth.

Folklore

Nettle fibres are strong and relatively long and this has been exploited by many making textiles since the Bronze Age, right up until the Second World War.

Across Europe, it was believed that this plant was collected by the Devil to make its new shirt and again in the fairy tale 'Wild Swans' written by Hans Christian Anderson, the story tells of a young girl forced to make 11 nettle shirts to break a spell cast upon her brothers, whom had been turned into swans. Quite a job if considering that to make one shirt, it takes 88lbs (40kgs) of nettle!

Folk Medicine

Nettles have been put to good use since the 16th century. The plant is a high source of iron however, only the tips of very young plants can be used as they become toxic the older they get.

Nettles have been used to treat anaemia and help ease the effects of heavy periods. Rubbing nettles into arthritic joints has long been used to ease the pain and country folk would thrash the joint lightly to bring relief. Nettle tea was prescribed to clear stones in the urinary tract and to cleanse the kidneys.



*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.