

Grasping the Nettle

Infamous for its power to sting and ability to grow like wild fire, the humble nettle, of which there are 30 different varieties, has many other qualities which should encourage us to view it in a more positive light. For example it is rich in vitamins A and C, as well as containing a variety of minerals including iron, calcium and copper. Its leaves are a valuable source of flavinoids and are reputed to have more protein than any other green vegetable. If this was not enough this most common of weeds is also reputed to have medicinal qualities by helping to cleanse the system and alleviate hay fever and some skin allergies.

Valued in the Second World War for its nutritional value as well as for making camouflage dye, the ill forgotten nettle is once again set for a revival, with the likes of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall extolling its virtues. Nettle omelettes, haggis, wine and beer are to name but a few of the potential culinary delights, although for those of us who prefer simple fare, the young leaves can be simply cooked like spinach and eaten boiled with butter. This is the perfect time to harvest nettles as there will be an abundance of new tender shoots with lots of young leaves, whereas later in the year the plant can tend to suffer from being rather bitter and stringy. Aim to collect clean young tips and of course ensure that you have adequate protection from nettle stings with good quality gloves and a long sleeved top. The nettle sting is born of precision with each hair stiffened by silica, so that when you come into contact, it breaks to expose a sharp point which penetrates the skin and injects a complex range of chemical agents from its base, including histamine, acetylcholine and serotonin. If you do get stung rub vigorously with dock leaves or alternatively use soap, vinegar or bicarbonate of soda.

Little Known Facts about the Nettle:

- 1 The nettle supports over 40 species of insect and is a valuable source of food for the caterpillars of the peacock, small tortoiseshell and red admiral butterflies
- 2 When Germany ran short of materials during the Second World War, large amounts of nettle were cultivated as a cotton substitute
- 3 Nettle leaves can be used to make a useful fertiliser, which if undiluted can be used as a pesticide against aphids
- 4 A large nettle plant can produce over 40,000 seeds, which is a valuable source of food for seed eating birds

Recipe for Nettle Soup

- 1lb of Jersey potatoes
- ½ lb of young nettle tips
- 2 oz of Jersey butter
- 1 1/2 pints of chicken or vegetable stock
- Sea salt and black pepper
- tbsp of sour cream

Peel and chop your potatoes before cooking in salted water for 10 minutes. Drain the potatoes and then with gloved hands wash and cut/chop the nettles coarsely. Melt the butter in a saucepan, before adding the nettles and stewing gently for a few minutes. Add the heated stock and potatoes and bring to the boil. Simmer for 10 minutes or until the potatoes are tender. Cool slightly and then puree, adding seasoning and sour cream.

