

In Praise of Stinging Nettles

Contributed by Gil, with additional material from the Downsizer forum archives

Gil, with a little help from his friends, takes the sting out of this notorious weed with some delicious recipes.

The snowdrops and daffodils have flowered, the birds are singing, you've been out digging and sowing like crazy, and spring is well on its way. Only trouble is that you've got next to no green veg on the plot. You've eaten almost all the overwintering greens, except purple sprouting broccoli, which is just starting to head, but none of what you've put in so far this year has yet produced enough for a decent meal (unless you're a glasshouse / polytunnel type, and live much further south than I do).

One of the first plants to start growing again after the winter is the common stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*). Groans all round, as this heralds the start of the weeding year. OK, you don't want them rampant in your plots or beds, but a few patches (or more) of nettles around the place can provide you with a number of fine-tasting seasonal treats, as well as having other valuable practical uses.

Nettles are fantastic! Don't let them go to waste!

This article covers the following:

1. Gathering and preparation
2. Nettles as a green vegetable (including soup)
3. Other culinary uses for nettles (including pasta)
4. Drinks made from nettles (wine, beer, tea, soft drinks)

1. Gathering and preparation

Wear gloves to pick them. I usually wear gardening or similar gloves (leather, suede, thick rubber/plastic). Those thin rubber washing-up gloves won't really do, and nor will fine wool. If you get stung, console yourself with the thought that nettle stings have traditionally been regarded as a cure for arthritis/rheumatism (probably because the sensation takes your mind off the other pain). In the Middle Ages, monks used to beat themselves with nettles as a penance, and invading (and desperate) Roman soldiers stung their arms and legs with nettles to keep warm in the British climate.

Pick the youngest, topmost leaves (the tips, and maybe the next couple of pairs of leaves). If the nettles are young, you can use the stems as well, but as the plant gets a bit older, the stems become more fibrous, and you can just strip the top leaves off for culinary use. Eventually, the leaves also become a bit tough. However, if you keep picking or cutting your nettles through the spring and summer, you can ensure a steady supply of new, young leaves.

When picking, be careful not to crush caterpillars and other animals. Nettles are great food for wildlife, and a little care will ensure enough food for both you and the butterflies.

Avoid picking from beside [busy] roads or where they might have been sprayed with pesticides or fertilizers. Avoid picking from places where dogs might have peed on them when they are very small.

Rinse before using for food or drink, still wearing gloves.

The sting (antihistamine-related) is removed by drying or heating.

2. Nettles as a green vegetable

This is the most obvious use for nettles. High in Vitamin C and iron, nettles are good for you. They also taste surprisingly good. Traditionally, nettles were eaten in a variety of ways as a spring tonic and cleanser, and as something green and fresh after a winter diet that consisted mainly of meat, root vegetables and cabbage. The sting goes after they are cooked or processed. Think of them as an alternative to spinach.

2.1 Nettles can be cooked as a vegetable in their own right:

- well-steamed

- rinsed and not drained too thoroughly, then sweated with some oil in a pan. This method is even better if you first sweat a finely-chopped onion until it's cooked, then some garlic, and finally chuck the nettles in top, allow to wilt down, then stir around to mix.

How many nettles do I need? They cook down to a much smaller volume than you start with, so work on spinach

principles for portion size. Take a carrier bag when collecting.

What spices to use? Grated nutmeg goes just as well with nettles as it does with spinach. Likewise butter and black pepper.

What do you mean, a spinach substitute? This year I might try replacing the spinach in some of my favourite recipes with nettles, earlier in the year, before my perpetual spinach beet is cropping. These include:

- nettle and chickpea curry
- a 'green' couscous including sweated nettles

2.2 Nettle Soup: this is unbelievably good. It tastes of spring, green (greenness? spring greens?), with an indescribable flavour, and you can feel it doing you good. Baaaaa !

Gil's Nettle Soup

Ingredients

1 medium or large onion, chopped
 garlic, chopped
 oil for sweating
 2 medium potatoes (non-salad type)
 enough nettle tips and upper leaves to fill the pan a couple of times, rinsed and with some water still on
 butter (optional)
 milk
 grated nutmeg, to taste
 black pepper, ditto

I don't think this needs any salt. You may disagree.

If you were feeling particularly decadent, you could add some single cream before serving.

Kit

Large saucepan
 Grater (normal kind)
 Grater for nutmeg
 Liquidiser

Method

1. Sweat the onion
2. Grate the potatoes coarsely, and sweat till soft/done; stir the mix so it doesn't stick or burn
3. Add the garlic, cook for 1 minute more
4. Add the nettles, in 2 instalments if necessary, cook down till soft
5. Add a large knob of butter (optional)
6. Cool for a bit
7. Liquidise with ½ pint cold milk, and check consistency
8. Add more milk or water till the soup is the thickness you like
9. Return to pan and reheat, add grated nutmeg and black pepper, and serve.

Serves 2 extremely hungry/greedy people, not as a starter. Or 4 people as a starter.

If you want to freeze this soup, stop after the veg are cooked (step 4). After defrosting, warm through, add the butter, liquidize with the milk (and water), reheat and add the spices.

Mat S's Nettle Soups

"Recipe at

<http://www.nettles.org.uk/nettles/activities/nettlesoup.asp>

But I think a "standard" (whatever you've got around) veg soup with a load of young nettles piled in at the end is better. "

3.Other culinary uses for nettles

Tigger's Nettle Pasta

"Instead of using spinach to make flavoured pasta you can use nettles. Only use the new leaves from the nettle tops (and remember to use gloves to handle them until they're cooked!). Like spinach they shrink a lot so you need quite a few to make enough for 1/2 kg of flour. Cooked and well-drained the portion should be about as big as a bar of soap."

Tigger's Nettle Omelette

"Nettles can also be used in an omelette. Cook the nettles first. Treat as though making a spinach omelette."

I quite fancy the idea of a Spanish omelette with nettles, made with cubes of cooked potato, fried onion and red peppers, and sweated nettles. Or an onion, mushroom and nettle omelette.

Nettle Cheeses

Given the way spinach and cheese go well together, it is not surprising that there are various cheeses available that involve nettles. For instance, Cornish Yarg comes wrapped in / sprinkled with nettle leaves. I once won an Edam-sized hard nettle cheese in a pub quiz. It had a sprinkling of nettle leaves through as well as around it; very nice, but not particularly nettly.

I know nothing about making cheese. You might like to try making your own. Here's a suggestion:

Cab's Nettle Cheese

"I made a nettle cheese two years ago. Whole fat milk heated to blood temperature, separated out with vinegar, strained, squeezed, blended with just a drop of whole cream, wrapped in nettle leaves, squashed, and left in the fridge for a week and a half. Tasty."

4. Nettle Beverages

4.1 Nettle Tea

Well, I like this. But I've yet to meet anyone else who will admit to the same. I usually buy the branded, boxed teabags. I have tried making it with fresh nettles, but I think it tastes like cat's p***. One solution might be to dry your nettles first, then rub the leaves from the stalks and crumble up. I don't think fresh nettles and boiling hot water agree with each other – I think that's where and why the feline smell and taste can arise.

If you're into herbal medicine, nettles are said to have useful properties other than as a spring tonic and cleanser. A tea, or infusion, of nettles is a common method of using this herb. Check out the following site for more general information about nettles :

<http://www.nettles.org.uk>

4.2 Nettle Wines

Oh, dear ... nettle seems to be the Cinderella of country wines.

And not a favourite with some of the most experienced Downsizer homebrewers. Cab said, "If you're just branching in to 'country' wines, nettle wouldn't be my first choice…. Nettle wine is a 'love it or hate it' thing", and Mark's comment was, "I don't think much of nettles as a winemaking ingredient anyway... but it is worth trying everything!!"

I respectfully beg to disagree. Very respectfully, but exceedingly strongly. It's not a wine I would give away in whole bottles for homebrew novices to try. Not in the way, for example, that I would bung them a bottle of birch sap or ginger, or a fruit-based red or rose, and leave them to it. No, indeedy. I want to keep all my nettle wine to myself, 'cos it's just sooooo good. Idiosyncratic stuff. Wine with attitude. But you can have the recipe.

Gil's Nettle Wine

If you like other nettle things, you'll enjoy this. It should turn out full-bodied, with a green, lush nose and flavour that can stand pairing with hearty foods like rabbit casserole.

I reckon the trick lies in how you treat the nettles. Do not, whatever you do, boil them up to extract the flavour. Don't even get boiling water anywhere near them. You will end up with cat's p***. If you're confident that the nettles are clean enough, don't sulphite them when steeping. Treat your nettle almost as you might treat the blossoms for a flower wine.

Ingredients (per gallon)

4 pints of nettle tops (loosely pressed down to measure)
 1 kg sugar
 1 litre white grape juice
 juice of 2 lemons
 a small piece of root ginger, bashed (optional)
 ½ a mug strong black tea (pot dregs)
 yeast starter
 yeast nutrient (optional)

Method

1. Wash the nettles well in cold water, place in sterilised bucket, and add 1 pint cold water [add sulphite to sterilise if you are being cautious and leave overnight, stirring well to dispel sulphite before proceeding]
2. Add 1 litre grape juice, lemon juice, black tea
3. Boil up 1 pint water, dissolve the sugar in it, [add ginger if using], cool slightly
4. Add to nettle mix in bucket
5. Make up yeast starter, add to bucket
6. Leave to steep for 5-7 days in a warm place, stirring at least daily to push the nettles down into the liquid
7. Strain into a demi-john through a jelly bag or muslin cloth in a funnel, adding more water if needed to make up to 1 gallon, and aiming roughly for a SG of 1090-1100, and put under airlock
8. Leave in a warm place to ferment out – could go down to SG 990
9. Rack, mature (for about 4 months), and bottle.

Angus came round to mend the Rayburn while I was making this last year, pulled a face and said, 'that looks like pond water'. He was right. It looked like something out of the burn in spate until it cleared to a rich golden-yellow.

Blacksmith's Nettle Wine

"I haven't got a recipe for nettle wine, but am in the process of making my second batch of oak leaf wine (3 gallons this time). I would imagine the process is similar for nettle.

Ingredients

10 pints of leaves
 1 gallon of water
 2 lemons
 2 lb sugar
 yeast

Method

Pour the boiling water over the leaves, leave over night, strain into a pan, bring to the boil, simmer for 15 mins. Add grated lemon rind and juice. Add sugar, allow to cool to blood temperature. Add yeast, leave in bucket for 5 days, funnel into a demijohn.

Allow to ferment out, rack off, filter and bottle.

Cheers ! Dave."

And my comment? An awful lot of boiling of water involved in the above, which would be needed for an oakleaf wine, but not for nettle. And 10 pints seems like a lot of nettles, but would be OK for oak leaves. Just pour the boiling water over the nettles, and don't re-boil the following day.

Cab's hints on nettle wine and a link to a recipe on another website -

"Get yourselves some rubber gloves and pick only young plants and the softer tips of older plants.

Bear in mind that American quantities are a little out, but this recipe doesn't look bad:

<http://winemaking.jackkeller.net/nettles.asp>"

Mark's hint on nettle wine -

"Please remember alcohol isn't the only thing that affects strength of taste and body - in my book nettles will always need additional ingredients like raisins or fruit to give a decent wine."

4.3 Nettle Beer

<http://forum.downsizer.net/viewtopic.php?t=3511>

Some Downsizers made nettle beer last year (2005) :

Treacodactyl's Nettle Beer

"As my nettle patch is doing rather well I thought I'd try a small batch of nettle beer. I put a gallon on last night. Quite simple, nettles and a little grated root ginger, sugar and a little cream of tartar. Should be ready in a couple of weeks so I'll let you know how it turns out."

Sometime later...

"As a late Spring / Early Summer evening drink nettle beer's not too bad and I'll make another batch this year with some added ginger root. It's not something I would go mad on. However, I'll certainly carry on eating nettles and another bonus with them is the pigeons don't eat them! All our normal leaf crops have been eaten by pigeons this year but the nettles are untouched. "

I wonder whether you could add the juice of a lemon to good effect here?

Live The Dream (Anthony)'s Nettle Beer

"Made my first ever batch the other week and it is very good and refreshing. It does have a rather higher alcohol content than you would think though. The only tip I could give you is not to be put off by the disgusting smell when it is being boiled up.

This may help a bit - <http://forum.rivercottage.net/viewtopic.php?t=8315>

"I used the recipe from a book called 'Wild Food'. I can't remember the author (it may well have been Roger Phillips) but I did use more nettles than he said. Hope this helps. "

One farmer I know round here spent a day feeling fragile on the sofa after a session on a friend's homemade nettle beer, so this is clearly one brew to treat with caution !

There's a picture here: <http://forum.downsizer.net/viewtopic.php?t=3092>