

NETTLE LORE

Folklore and history

Nettles enjoy a very long history in folklore and traditional medicine.

With such rich cultural meaning, it's no wonder that Nettle has been utilized fully throughout history. Whilst the Egyptians were using the Nettle for medicinal purposes, around the same time in Bronze Age Denmark, shrouds were being made from Nettle fibers. Within Europe Nettle has always had multifaceted uses whether for food, drink, clothes and medicine. From the 18th century all these uses subsided as Nettle became to be seen as a plant only fit for those who couldn't afford more expensive medicine or cloth. In both World War I and II Nettle was used either for its dye or fiber with the British government ordering 100 tons of the plant because it was a good dye for camouflage.

In Norse legend, the god Thor is often represented by Nettles and it is said that if you burn Nettles during a thunderstorm you will be protected from lightning.

In Celtic lore, thick stands of nettles indicate that there are fairy dwellings close by, and the sting of the nettle protects against fairy mischief, black magic, and other forms of sorcery.

"Mixing medicine and magic, a healer could cure fever by pulling up a nettle by its roots while speaking the patient's name and those of his parents. Roman soldiers in damp Britain found that rheumatic joints responded to a beating with nettles. Tyroleans threw nettles on the fire to avert thunderstorms, and gathered nettle before sunrise to protect their cattle from evil spirits."

"Nettles have numerous virtues," writes Margaret Baker in *Discovering the Folklore of Plants*. "Nettle oil preceded paraffin; the juice curdled milk and helped to make Cheshire cheese; nettle juice seals leaky barrels; nettles drive frogs from beehives and flies from larders; nettle compost encourages ailing plants; and fruits packed in nettle leaves retain their bloom and freshness.

The medicinal value of nettles is confirmed by Julie Bruton-Seal & Matthew Seal in their useful book *Hedgerow Medicine*:

"Nettle was the Anglo-Saxon sacred herb *wergula*, and in medieval times nettle beer was drunk for rheumatism. Nettle's high vitamin C content made it a valuable spring tonic for our ancestors after a winter of living on grain and salted meat, with hardly any green vegetables. Nettle soup and porridge were popular spring tonic purifiers, but a pasta or pesto from the leaves is a worthily nutritious modern alternative. Nettle soup is described by one modern writer as 'Springtime herbalism at one of its finest moments.' This soup is the Scottish *kail*. Tibetans believe that their sage and poet Milarepa (AD 1052-1135) lived solely on nettle soup for many years until he himself turned green: a literal green man.

Traditional use

Perhaps the oldest evidence of Nettle being used for medicinal purposes is in Ancient Egypt where they prepared a Nettle infusion for arthritis and lumbago pains. They used the sting of Nettle in urtification (the practice of flogging oneself with fresh nettles) - this was believed to help with rheumatism, lethargy, coma, paralysis, and even typhus and cholera. Urtification was also practiced by Roman soldiers to stimulate circulation on cold days in Northern Europe and to treat tired painful legs on long marches.

Also used for dyeing cloth while the fiber was used to make cordage.

Nettles once rivaled flax and hemp (and later, cotton) as a staple fiber for thread and yarn, used to make everything from heavy sailcloth to fine table linen up to the 17th/18th centuries. Other fibers proved more economical as the making of cloth became more mechanized, but in some areas (such as the highlands of Scotland) nettle cloth is still made to this day.

Hippocrates had around 61 different Nettle preparations. The Greek medical scripture 'De Simplicibus' suggests Nettle for 'a diuretic and laxative, for dog bites, gangrenous wounds, swellings, nose bleeding, excessive menstruation, spleen-related illness, pleurisy, pneumonia, asthma, tinea, and mouth sores.' Later additions included Nettle mixed with Hemp plant for relief from shock as well as Nettle on its own being used for shingles and constipation.

"Old Nettle Woman"

*Old Nettle Woman finds me.
She comes to me in my deepest sleep.
She fills me with chlorophyll dreaming.
She whispers strength that flows from her fibrous roots,
and smiles the truth in the sting of her tiny needles.*

*Old Nettle Woman leads me to the creek side.
Her skirts rustle softly as she walks,
a delicate breeze in dark green leaves.
She settles on the bank beside me.
Her slender hands pull her prickly shawl closer,
and she gazes green on flowing water.*

*I bend my head to hear her soft voice,
and she spins a story of her lover the sun who courted her in the spring
by kissing and warming her tender maiden leaves.
She hums of crystal incandescent green and how she became so full of love for the sun,
that his light filled her and she unfurled her leaves,
And stretched her stems to reach for him in the deep blue summer sky.*

*Old Nettle Woman sits up straight while she sings of growing taller.
And then she smiles wickedly,
and weaves a tale of summer days when she pulled the sun so close to her
that the heat of their passion
burnt the tips of her leaves and left her panting in the dry dusty heat,
until the autumn rains came
and tiny droplets were succulent on her thirsty foliage.*

*I feel her scratchy seed clusters brush against my cheek,
and I strain to listen more closely.
The heat of their passion is singing in the dusty mist of pollen as it is released.
Her tiny black baby seeds dance around her in the breeze.
Some settle around their mama and others fly across the creek
to live and grow in parts unknown.*

All her children are beloved equally...

And I realize that she and I are the same.

*The sun loves us and
our children fly in the breeze.*

Old Nettle Woman bows her head.

*She is of the water and the soil and the air,
and though her roots have begun to pull her back,
it is her passion for the sun that will most sustain her
when the winter snows begin to fall
and she sinks and settles into the earth below.*

Author unknown

