

nettles, oats and you...

...presented by herbalist jim mcdonald

stinging nettle *urtica dioica; u. urens*

Nettle is a common weed that houses an abundance of healing virtues... I consider it, along with Burdock, one of the most universally beneficial herbs to use as basis for restoring and maintaining well being. This is the same "stinging" nettle that you may have (unfortunately) first run into while hiking through a field or in damp woods, and gotten a greeting like a swarm of angry bees... fresh Nettles contain chemicals akin to formic acid, the chemical found in bee and red ant venom. It is a tall plant with a square-ish stem (it sorta looks like two of those double-barreled cocktail straws side by side), producing jagged edged leaves in alternating pairs up the stem. Looking closely, one can see the prickly hairs on the stems and leaves that contain its notorious sting. Nettle bears its strands of dangling, tiny green flowers in late summer, and yields a copious quantity of seeds in the fall.

Nettle is one of the archetypal "Alterative" herbs, herbs that nourish our health by strengthening and balancing metabolic functions. It aids the liver in detoxification, and treats skin disorders such as eczema, psoriasis and other rashes, which are believed to result from poor metabolic function. Matt Wood suggests that when used fresh, Nettle improves protein metabolism. Its diuretic properties help rid the body of wastes, uric acid (associated with gout, arthritis & rheumatism), and helps to relieve edema & water retention. It is a very mild astringent, and helps to tighten and tone the internal tissues of the kidneys and urinary & reproductive tract, making it an ideal tonic for people with recurring UTIs and dark, concentrated urine. Nettle told David Winston (yes, you read that right) to use its seed as a restorative kidney tonic for severe cases of kidney failure. He listened, tried it, and since then he and many other herbalists have discovered that Nettle seed seems to act as a trophorestorative to the kidneys, literally building them back up from a state of severe degradation to one of improved health & functioning. This doesn't mean it can bring someone whose kidneys are down to 4% of normal function back to 100%, but it has helped keep people off dialysis and indeed gotten people off dialysis. Jonathan Treasure has a nice, quantified account of this on his site www.herbological.com.

Nettles are a highly regarded restorative tonic for exhausted adrenals. When people are always on the go, don't have adequate time to relax, and feel as if their time and energy is always in demand, the adrenal glands react by producing adrenaline and other stress hormones, which creates a "fight or flight response". Though this response is essential to keep us safe in emergency situations (oh wow... that car in front of me is **stopped**... and getting closer *very quickly*...), it is *not* very efficient in dealing with the prolonged "modern-day stress" most of us know all too well (deadlines at work and school, a hundred activities crammed into a two day weekend, not making time for creativity, recreation and rest, preoccupied and constantly worrying about what you're sure you must be forgetting to do...). The result is usually a combination of exhausted lethargy and nervous anxiety; of feeling "run down" but unable to let yourself relax (I'm home from work, I just want to chill out and do nothing... but I have to do this and that and something else by tomorrow morning, and I'll have to get up at 4:30 to get it all done... well, lets see what's on TV... nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing... Oh my God... How could 3 1/2 hours have passed! I needed to ... screw it, I'm exhausted, I'll just go to bed... Damn it, I can't sleep!). Nettles are good for that, and taken regularly as a nourishing restorative tonic, they will lessen the intensity and tenacity of this state.

You see, when you're in that stressed out "adrenal mode", your energy is being supplied by stress hormones - *not* normal metabolism. This is because in a real "fight or flight" scenario, you don't want digesting your lunch to take precedence over getting away from that rabid miniature pinscher that's chasing you... your metabolism politely says to the adrenals, "I think I'll let you handle this... let me know when it's over". Problem is, there seems to be *no end* to "modern day stress". So the adrenals don't get a chance to relax; they keep trying to eek out more and more adrenalin till they sense the stressful situation is over. This eventually leads to the "ups" and "downs" too many of us are familiar with: alternating bursts of adrenalin (anxious energy), and adrenal exhaustion (run down, tapped out... call it what you will).

To make matters worse, your metabolism is stuck in "backseat mode", waiting for the "all clear" signal from the adrenals before they return to their predominant role in the creation of energy from the food you eat. So, while you're stuck in stress mode, your metabolic functions are deficient. What I think Nettles do is help the body switch back from adrenal to metabolic dominance (or, looked at from another angle, sympathetic to parasympathetic nervous system); they say to the metabolism, "Hey... the adrenals have gotten preoccupied, but it's time for you to take over again". For this application, I think fresh Nettle tincture is preferable to the tea; or, at least should be used along side it. Finnish Herbalist Henriette Kress recommends Nettle seed for this, and offers this:

"Nettle seed helps the adrenals, and the kidneys. A century ago it was in use to get better prices for horses - just give 'em a handful or two of nettle seed for about two weeks before market day and whoa, they're suddenly sprightly, colt-like, with shiny pelts. Once they're in their new home, without the nettle seed, they soon revert back to their old tired selves. I give it to generally run-down people, the sort who has lots to do but is too tired to. Works a treat. Tastes bad during the first week of a tablespoon a day, but after that they usually like it, enough to call the minute they've run out of nettle seed." Anima medicine woman Kiva Rose has likewise used nettle seed as a restorative tonic with excellent results, using either the green seeds eaten directly or as a tincture. She shares that Nettle seed "promotes a sense of clarity, wellness, heightened energy levels, reduced stress and seemingly increased lung capacity. They are especially effective for those suffering from severe burnout, resulting in profound fatigue, brain fog, chronic pain and alternating feelings of depression and intense anxiety. Nettle seed can lessen all of these symptoms, and sometimes eliminate them completely. For some people, they can dramatically effect or shift perception, promoting a sense of connectedness, well-being and mild euphoria. Physical and mental stamina is usually increased, and exertion may seem more enjoyable to the individual."

While acknowledging Nettle's impressive virtues, this type of situation requires a change in both attitude and lifestyle as much as a spoonful of seeds or dropperful of tincture; but by addressing our body's physiological responses to stress and nourishing ourselves with Nettle, we are creating an environment more suitable to healing our physiology, lifestyle *and* mindset. Nettles is truly a restorative tonic, both a food and a medicine. I think many people taking Saint John's Wort for depression should actually be taking Nettles and Milky Oats for exhausted adrenals, LONG TERM, on a REGULAR BASIS. *Consistency* is important.

Nettles nourish both the male & female reproductive systems as well. A tea of the leaves serves as an excellent uterine tonic, and combines well with Raspberry not only during pregnancy, but throughout a woman's entire life. The roots, gathered in the fall

after the plant goes to seed, are used to treat Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy (enlarged prostate), which afflicts the majority of men over 50. Many of the new "viagra" type herbal formulas (most of which are badly formulated, poor quality trash) that are popping up all over the place (as products and in books, articles and magazines) for men and women include Nettles... not because it's an "aphrodisiac", but because it's a nourishing tonic. The more nourished you are, the more energy you have. The more energy you have the more you can... well... *you know...*

Even the infamous sting of Nettles supplies medicinal action. An old tradition, called "urtication", used to treat arthritis, rheumatism and paralysis involved flogging the ailing body parts with fresh Stinging Nettles (they did this for impotence, too... OWWWWW!). Though this seems rather extreme (i.e.: crazy) it does produce results, and I've had first hand success in treating painful joints from arthritis, tendonitis and various injuries. One of your fellow students used Stinging Nettle to restore sensation in his fingers after a severe bike accident by stinging himself on one of these walks. My own belief is that Nettle's "sting" stimulates ("jump starts") an electrochemical response in the nervous system, as it reminds me of the "tinglies" one gets after they discovered they fell asleep on their arm and they can't move it. First, the arm is like a dead weight hanging from your torso - then come the "tinglies", that pins and needles feeling that come before being able to actually move your own fingers. While many people have heard of the benefits to inflamed or atrophied nerve conditions that can follow a bee's sting, few have applied this potential to Nettle sting. I personally think that anyone suffering from degenerative nervous conditions or nerve injuries would do well to try a rather "unorthodox" treatment such as this, along with internal and external use of Saint John's Wort, which also help repair injured nerves.

Because of this "medicinal sting", I prefer to make my own Nettle tinctures from the fresh plant (you won't get stung using a fresh Nettle tea or tincture, but you will receive the benefits of that the sting offers). When Nettles dry, they lose most of their sting, *usually* within 10-20 minutes. You may find, however, a surprise when stripping dried leaves off of I should say, though, that several of my herbalist friends consider Nettle tincture a "waste of good alcohol", and emphatically insist that the tea is a much more effective way to use the plant. If you're using Nettles for its rich mineral/iron content, this is certainly true... but it certainly doesn't negate that a fresh herb tincture brings out other healing virtues of this blessed plant. Really, this is a moot point, as Nettles isn't a plant best used in one form over another... its best used in *all* of its forms.

Nettles contain a host of nutrients, and is arguably the most nutritious wild vegetable in North America. Many fine herbalists (me among them) consider Nettles to be an equal to more costly and exotic "super foods" such as spirulina, bee pollen and the like. Nettles is especially high in chlorophyll & protein (having, to my knowledge, more protein than any other North American plant), and also boasts a high iron content. This iron content makes it a very valuable aid in treating anemia, for which Nettles should become a regular part of the diet, infused in water overnight then drunk throughout the following day (it's interesting to note that Nettle not only provides iron, but also improves the body's ability to effectively utilize it). I regularly add Nettles to pasta sauce, noodles, stir fries, soups, and lots of other stuff; combined it with other wild greens as a regular part of your diet, being sure to cook it enough to get the sting out (though you don't have to boil the life out of it). Fresh Nettles can be cooked in foods wherever spinach is called for.

In the words of southwest herbalist extraordinaire Michael Moore:

Every year we see some new harebrained food supplement derived from weird sources, containing new stuff we didn't know we needed (or even existed), and which we can now obtain... usually at great expense. Nettle is something you can gather yourself in places that you trust, and you can add it to smoothies and salad dressings, put it in bread, add it to your tea, home beer and so forth. It is green food that your body recognizes and can help build blood, tissue and self empowerment.

Considerations and Contraindications: None, other than watching out for its sting. Some people are rather sensitive and break out in hives.

milky oats *avena sativa*

Milky Oats come, indeed, from the very same plant used for making Oatmeal. Indeed, this plant yields a number of virtues in its various stages of growth. "Oatstraw" - the entire grass - is an immensely nutritious mineral tonic, which is deeply nourishing to the whole of the body. As a nervine tonic for the nervous system and adrenals, though, we want to use the fresh, unripe seed, often referred to as "milky" or "in milk", because if the seed is squeezed, and milky sap exudes. Oatmeal itself is also deeply nutritive, and very soothing to irritated and enflamed tissues when used in a bath.

Milky Oats act strongly on the nervous system as a tonic, gently calming the mind and spirit while strengthening the nerves physiologically as well. Its action is specifically tonic, and not merely calming or relaxing; regular usage builds up both the structure and function of nervous and adrenal tissue, resulting in a lasting strengthening effect. It is especially well suited to nervous exhaustion due to debilitating nervous system disorders, overwork (mental or physical), drug abuse, and should be used during any period of prolonged stress. I believe that anyone suffering from compulsive addictions would do well to add Oats to their daily regimen. In fact, as a flower essence, Oats are indicated for "helping one determine one's intended path in life", a goal often thwarted by compulsive drug use.

The mental state associated with a need for Milky Oats is one of anxiety and exhaustion. Though there is a lingering feeling of things that must get done, there seems to be no energy with which to do it; linear thinking is hard, focusing on one thing is hard. Simple tasks seem overwhelming. Men may find that their sex drive has dried up; women may find that this same feeling is compounded by difficult menses. Sleep is usually troubled... maybe, for example, the person stays up late because they don't feel like they've accomplished enough, even if they don't know what else it is they want to accomplish before going to bed. Often, all this has been precipitated by a period of (or predisposition to) intense overwork, without adequate time given to rest and recuperation. People requiring Oats are often "driven" people; perfectionists who always get things done, usually at their own expense. As mentioned above, it could also be that one has spent too much time stoned, and leans heavily on addictions to keep them going. This does not only mean overuse of marijuana, but stimulants, Coffee, Opiates, Tobacco... anything that either keeps the motor going or simulates real rest by forcing the body to shut down. In a nutshell, if you feel like you've "bottomed out", are unable to put things together to achieve your goals, dreams or aspirations, or feel overwhelmed at the thought of trying to break out of habits and/or addictive behaviors, Milky Oats are a must for a long term herbal regimen. They will not work instantly, but will, over a period of time, nourish your

nervous system and adrenals and make you both mentally and physically better equipped to deal with the day to day stuff you need to do to get where you want to go.

Finnish herbalist Henriette Kress shares another aspect in which Milky Oats excel: "Milky Oats is the single best herb for sudden loss, be it from the tsunamis in Asia or from cancer in somebody close to you. I recommend it both for those who are directly affected by the loss and sorrow and for those who stand beside them, frustrated by their sheer helplessness."

Milky Oats should be taken as a liquid extract made from the fresh unripe seeds. As these seeds dry, much of the complex components that provide its restorative effects on the body are converted to relatively simple carbohydrates, not near as effective as the fresh herb. I almost always use Milky Oats in combination with other herbs, and the number of excellent combinations that can be had are endless... mix with Nettles, with Burdock... how bout Motherwort? There's a good one. Or (ooh!) Cactus Grandiflorus...wow! Or Saint John's Wort, or Black Cohosh, or Wood Betony, or my new favorite formula (this is so good): Milky Oats, Lemon Balm & Hawthorne Berry. Exquisite.

As a mineral rich nutritive tonic, oatstraw or dried oat tops are best prepared as a strong infusion. Place an ounce of dried herb in a quart mason jar, cover with boiling water and let it sit out for several hours. Doing this in the evening allows for a potent brew to await you in the morning; simply strain, and if desired, heat, sweeten or flavor in whatever way suits you best. Oatstraw is perhaps our best source of silica for regular use. Often, you'll see this virtue attributed to horsetail, but horsetail is decidedly more medicinal in action, and so not, in my opinion, suited to regular use, at least without its other medicinal virtues being specifically called for.

Considerations and Contraindications: None, really. There is perpetual debate about Oats and gluten, and to my knowledge no definitive answer about whether those with gluten allergies should avoid it.

The Mineral Content of Selected Herbs (per ounce)

	Calcium	Chromium	Iron	Magnesium	Potassium	Selenium
	(Mg)	(mcg)	(mg)	(mg)	(mg)	(mcg)
Nettle Leaf	966	130	1.4	286	583	70
Oatstraw	476	130	0.4	400	90	40

http://medherb.com/Materia_Medica/The_Mineral_Content_of_Herbal_Decoctions_.htm