

# Nettle

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NETTLE—*Urtica lyallii*—Showing stem with leaves and flowers, section of root, single developed fruit, and seed. Seed magnified 5 diameters.

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(*Urtica lyallii*)

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Illustrations by Cathrine Davis Young

Other name: Stinging nettle.

*Tender handed stroke the nettle  
And it stings you for your pains;  
Grasp it like a man of nettle  
And it soft as silk remains.*

*Old verse.*

Nettles are widely distributed weeds mentioned adversely in literature from Old Testament days on down. They have minute hairs terminating in sharp hooks that on touching the skin discharge formic acid. They are reported to be a good source of fiber, but this use has never been commercially exploited.

There are several nettles found in Oregon, all similar. They occur in neglected yards, fence-rows, brush pastures, waste places, and along roadsides. The species herein described and illustrated is the most common. It is a moisture-loving perennial that reproduces by seeds and creeping rootstocks. Stems are erect and hollow and average about 4 feet tall. Leaves are opposite along the stem, are lance-shaped, pointed at the tip, but blunt at the base end. They have from 5 to 7 prominent veins running from the base of the leaf to the margins. At each joint along the stem there are always two large leaves produced opposite each other and generally several small ones borne on slender stems from  $\frac{1}{3}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  as long as the leaf. Leaves vary in length from about 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  to 8 inches, averaging about 5 inches, and have coarse saw-toothed margins. Foliage commonly is nearly smooth but has white hairs scattered along its surface. These hairs carry the substance that causes irritation to the flesh. Seeds are about  $\frac{1}{16}$  inch long, produced in compact clusters borne on small stems that arise from the axils of the leaves and the main stem. Flowers are an inconspicuous pale green.

**Damage.** Since the weed usually grows in waste places, the damage is usually more irritative than economic. The plant has practically no forage value because its sting can be felt by livestock as well as man, and it is usually shunned after the first experience. It is reported that dilute alcohol will relieve the burning caused by contact with the nettle.†

**Control.** As a rule, the rootstocks of this weed are not very deep. One season of clean summer fallow will kill them. If the area is plowed and cropped, the weed will not persist. Small areas can be grubbed out by hand or treated with sodium chlorate. Discussion on other methods of controlling perennial weeds and suggestions on the use of sodium chlorate are given in Extension Bulletin 510.

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† Ada Georgia, Macmillan Company, "Manual of Weeds."

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