Stinging Nettle

FACT SHEET 18-086-0716

Just the Facts...

Stinging nettle (Urtica dioica), is a weedy perennial plant found in parts of the United States and Canada, and in the temperate parts of Europe, Asia, and northern Africa. Contact with the hairs on the stems and leaves will release toxins that can cause severe skin irritation. The plant is known by many common names including common nettle, slender nettle, tall nettle, hoary nettle, burn nettle, burn weed, American stinging nettle, California nettle, European stinging nettle, brennnessel, brandnetel and L'ortie dioïque.

What does stinging nettle look like?

Stinging nettles typically grow from two to four feet in height but can reach up to nine feet in very rich soils. Their deeply serrated oval leaves are one to six inches long and grow on opposite sides of the square, hairy stems. Both the stems and the undersides of the leaves are covered in stinging hairs. Their small, greenish-white flowers are clustered in droopy spikes along the stems from June through September. The roots are whitish yellow and very tough.

How and where do stinging nettles grow?

The plants prefer to grow in shady, moist, nitrogen-rich soils found along stream banks, rivers, ditches, roadsides, moist woodlands, meadows and farm fields. The plant spreads by seed and by creeping underground rhizomes, which allow it to form dense colonies that regrow each year and exclude other native species. Each plant can produce over 20,000 seeds that remain viable for up to ten years in the soil.

Why should I not touch stinging nettle?

Touching stinging nettles causes a painful rash that can last for several hours to several days. In fact, the genus *Urtica* is derived from the Latin *uro* meaning "I burn". The sharp, needle-like hairs (called trichomes) on the undersides of the leaves and along the stems are filled with powerful toxins including histamine and formic acid. When contacted, the hairs will break open and spill their contents. Exposure to stinging nettle toxins can cause swelling, redness, a stinging or tingling sensation, numbness, and itching. Most animals, particularly those with short hair or areas of exposed skin, will also be affected by stinging nettle toxins in the same manner as humans. Stinging nettles also shed large quantities of

Identification: Stinging nettles are often found along the edges of aquatic habitats with nitrogen-rich soils (top left). These plants grow in clumps and often have clusters of greenish-white flowers along the stems as they mature (top right). The leaves of both the mature and immature plants (bottom left) have deep serrations along the edges and the square stems are covered in small, sharp hairs (bottom right) that can release toxins and can cause a painful rash upon contact with bare skin. Photos: Kevin Harkins, APHC.

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airborne pollen when they flower, this can contribute to seasonal allergies such as “hay fever”.

How can I avoid the painful rash caused by stinging nettles?

Know what stinging nettle looks like and avoid contact with bare skin. Wear gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and closed-toe shoes when working or recreating in areas where stinging nettles grow.

Rash from contact with stinging nettle toxins: Photo taken minutes after contact with the stems and leaves of stinging nettle. The red, painful, tingling rash may last from several hours to several days. Lotions with the active ingredient calamine (an anti-pruritic or anti-itching component) or topical corticosteroid creams can be used to help provide some relief from the inflammation and pain. Photo: Kevin Harkins, APHC.

What can I use to treat stinging nettle rash?

Lotions with the active ingredient calamine (an anti-pruritic or anti-itching component) can provide some relief to the painful, tingling, red rash caused by contact with stinging nettle. The use of topical corticosteroid creams may also help reduce the pain and inflammation associated with stinging nettle rashes.

How can I eliminate stinging nettle from my property?

Stinging nettles are a significant nuisance in the landscaping outside dwellings and workplaces and should not be tolerated around child day care facilities or schools. Contact installation Preventive Medicine personnel from your supporting clinic to identify suspect plants around buildings. Request assistance from the Installation Pest Control Office if stinging nettles are present and need to be controlled.

Non-chemical control approaches: Always wear protective clothing including gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and closed-toe shoes before handling stinging nettle. Dig up or pull out stinging nettles by the roots while the soil is still wet and dispose of the plants in a safe location. All the roots must be removed to achieve eradication. Avoid cultivating the plants into the soil because the remaining roots will regrow. Repeated mowing of stinging nettles will prevent the plants from flowering or developing seeds but the plants will still regrow.

Chemical control approaches: EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) registered herbicide products containing the active ingredients glyphosate, 2,4-D, or imazapyr are the most effective tools for stinging nettle elimination. Sprays must contact the leaves to be effective; applications are most effective when plants are small. Exercise care when using these herbicides since most shrubs, broadleaf ground covers, or other herbaceous plants contacted with the spray will also be killed. Keep children and pets away from treated areas. Children are particularly vulnerable to chemical exposures due to their rapid development and small body size. Pets may experience gastrointestinal problems (or worse) if they ingest plants or groom their feet or fur contaminated with herbicide. Always read and follow all the directions for use and any precautionary statements on the product label before using any herbicide for stinging nettle management.

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