

kitchen pharmacy

TIME FOR NETTLES

Now is the time to go out and find some young nettles, as they're at their best in spring. If you have access to a nettle patch, repeatedly cutting them back will produce fresh shoots, which can be harvested throughout the summer. If you haven't tried nettles in the kitchen, then try this:

Pick a bunch of nettle tops (wearing gloves!) and wash them in running water with a stick or long wooden spoon to knock out any lurking insects. Put into a saucepan, dripping, without any added water and cook with the lid on for 20 minutes. Chop thoroughly – they will have completely lost their sting by now – and serve with butter, salt, pepper, and a couple of poached eggs.

Nettles are highly rated in herbal medicine for many different reasons. The plant is classed as a 'dynamic accumulator', which means it absorbs a high volume and wide variety of minerals from the soil via its root system, making it a great source of readily available iron, calcium, potassium and magnesium, among many other vital nutrients. It is far more effective than any supplement pills, and most likely far richer in minerals than most common vegetables, as nettles tend to grow in mineral-rich soils that have not been depleted by industrial agriculture. If you currently fork out for expensive supplements, then it's really worth picking loads of nettles at this time of year to save yourself a bit of cash and feel

virtuous at the same time. You can dry them by hanging them up in bunches (don't worry as they soon lose their sting), and drink nettle tea throughout the year as well as using the dried herb in cooking. Wash and blanch in boiling water for two minutes, then chop and freeze in small packets to give you a regular supply of fresh nettle tops. The minerals contained within are much more readily absorbable than anything that comes in pill form.

In my dispensary I use nettle tincture in the treatment of a wide variety of conditions, both as a main treatment – for some cases of hay fever and eczema, and as an adjunct with other herbs where its anti-inflammatory and diuretic properties make a valuable contribution. Nettles can also help reduce blood sugar levels and stimulate the circulation, making nettle tea a really useful daily tonic to help prevent or delay the onset of many chronic conditions that seem ever more prevalent, such as diabetes and arthritis. I make tinctures from the tops, roots and seeds, as each part of the plant has its own set of uses and indications.

In general I would say respect the nettle. It's a classic medicinal herb, whose main value is in preventative medicine. It serves as a good example for how a good deal of herbal medicine works: by gently restoring many different physiological functions to produce a general improvement in health and well-being. In the hands of a skilled practitioner it can be used more specifically to help cure or ease many types of conditions. ■

Max Drake is a practising medical herbalist in Bristol and runs workshops and events with the *Urban Fringe Pharmacy*, teaching how to use herbs safely and effectively to treat common ailments.

To find out more about Max's medical practice, workshops and events, visit www.maxdrake.co.uk and www.urbanfringe.org.

