



# Nettles

## Why are they so important for our wildlife?

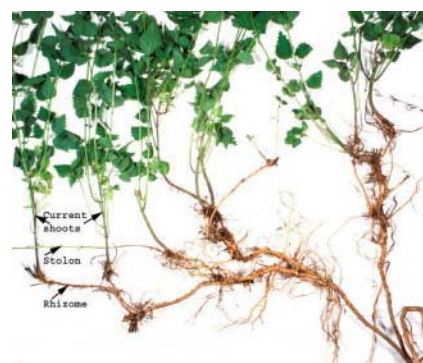
By Keith GR Wheeler

Keith has written a book "A Natural History of Nettles", which is packed with loads of information about this fascinating plant!  
ISBN: 1412026946  
Trafford Publishing



Photos: © Keith GR Wheeler

"Nettles are ugly, they have no flowers and they sting you", I hear you say. As a nettle lover I say "Why not try to look at them closely and you might find they have a hidden beauty". *Be sure to wear gloves* and look at them carefully through a hand lens. In early summer look at them for webs of caterpillars of our two most beautiful butterflies the small tortoiseshell and peacock. Collect some caterpillars to follow their amazing life-cycles. It might surprise you to know there are 107 different insects that need nettles but how do they avoid being

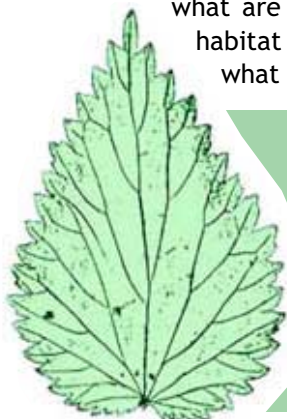


**Nettles have a large underground root system.**

stung? Why don't grazing cattle in a pasture eat the nettle clumps? Look at nettle hairs from the stem under a lens or better still the microscope to see nature's first beautiful hypodermic syringe. Did you know nettles are like humans, they have separate male and female clumps. Find the flowers in early June, and look for differences between females and males.

Other flowering plants do live in nettle clumps. In the spring whilst the nettles are small look for the golden flowers of the lesser celandine and the purple flowers of the ground ivy. Later in the year look for the white flowers of the cow parsnip and the very tall stinking and poisonous plant the hemlock. Make a list of other flowering plants growing amongst nettles. Early in the year look at nettles for woolly bears, caterpillars of the beautiful garden tiger moth and the green caterpillars of the pink and green angle shades moth. In late June find nettle clumps growing alongside a river, place a white sheet along the edge of them, beat them gently with a stick towards the sheet and you will be amazed at the number of small animals which fall onto the sheet. Collect some and try to identify them with a field guide.

Deer, especially the does, will often eat nettle tops; find out why. Ducks, pheasants and other small birds e.g. the whitethroat nest in nettles; why do they choose nettles? Moles commonly burrow under nettles; what are they looking for? Try to work out some simple food chains that are found in the nettle habitat e.g. nettle - woolly bear caterpillar - cuckoo - peregrine falcon. If nettles were wiped out what effect would this have on our wildlife?



Find out more about nettles from books and the Internet to answer the following questions; Are there tropical nettle trees? Which nettle is the world's worse stinger? Why are giant puffballs commonly found in nettle patches on farms? Why were nettles collected in England and Germany in World War I and II? Which countries in Europe are growing nettles to make clothes and what other uses are there for nettles? Why are nettles increasing in Britain?

<http://www.nettles.org.uk/>

<http://www.ienica.net/crops/nettle.htm>