



SNOW LOTUS

Aromatherapy, Education, Inspiration

## Nettle

### A Chinese Medicine Perspective

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The stinging nettle as a common weed needs no introduction: it provides a delicious springtime green vegetable and is an important traditional source of plant fiber for fabric and clothing. Nettle is also a foremost traditional Western remedy, having been used by physicians as far back as Dioskurides in early traditional Greek medicine. It saw a comeback in the herbal Renaissance of the early sixteenth century with European doctors such as Brunfels, Bock and Fuchs, and later with Turner, Cole and Culpeper in England. Nettle is the whole herb of *Urtica dioica* in the Urticaeae or nettle family. Its pharmaceutical name is *Herba Urticae* (using pharmaceutical nomenclature). Its traditional usage centers around its ability to restore and nourish on one hand (Schauenberg 1977, Mills 1978, Weiss 1985, Valnet 1983 et al.), and astringe and stop various discharges on the other (King 1898, Lyle 1897, Fyfe 1909, Weiss 1985, Valnet 1983 et al.)

### **Energetic Properties and Functions**

In terms of its toxicity category, Nettle is considered a mild remedy that possesses minimal to no chronic cumulative toxicity. It is a typical food-like herb alongside alfalfa, watercress, dandelion greens, and so on. It may therefore safely be used over long periods of time.

The taste is sweet, astringent and salty. Sweet gives it the potential for tonifying in deficiency conditions involving the Blood, the Spleen and the Kidney. Astringent allows it to astringe the lower warmer to contain fluids, and astringe to stop bleeding and discharge. Its salty taste can be used clinically to soften hardness and dissolve deposits.

The warmth/thermal quality is neutral. However, it can also act as a mild heat clearing herb in the presence of mild damp-heat in the lower warmer. The channels entered are the Liver, Spleen, Kidney, Bladder and Lung. In terms of the three warmers (san jiao), Nettle targets all three warmers, although it is clinically used primarily for conditions of the lower warmer. In the lower warmer this herb nourishes the Blood, regulates menstruation, braces the Kidney, clears damp-heat and softens hardness. In the middle warmer it tonifies Spleen Qi and stops diarrhea. In the upper warmer it stops coughing up of blood and relieves wheezing.

These qualities and essential actions in concert now provide us with grounding for a modern application of this herb in Chinese medicine.

## **Clinical Functions and Indications**

### **1. Nourishes the Blood, regulates menstruation and promotes lactation**

Nettle's most important function is arguably to nourish the Blood in patterns of Blood deficiency, with typical symptoms of fatigue, weariness, pale complexion and dizziness. Sweet, tonifying in property, it acts like the Chinese classics Shu Di Huang (Rx. *Rehmanniae praeparata*) and E Jiao (Gel. *corii Equi asini*), with two main differences. Firstly, it is neutral rather than warming. Secondly, its mild astringent quality means that it tends to eliminate damp rather than create it, unlike both these Chinese Blood tonics. This can be a clear advantage in patients presenting heat or damp alongside the Blood deficiency. Similar Western herbs here would include Artichoke leaf (Fm. *Cynarae*), Alfalfa (Hb. *Medicaginis*) and Chicory root (Rx. *Cichorii*).

Nettle also has a good reputation for treating Blood deficiency in gynecological disorders, especially with amenorrhea, late and/or irregular cycles, PMS and insufficient lactation. Here the classic models are Dang Gui (Rx. *Angelicae sinensis*) and Bai Shao Yao (Rx. *Paeoniae lactiflorae*), with which Nettle will combine with no problem. Western combining possibilities include Red clover (Fl. *Trifolii*), Rose (Fl. *Rosae damascenae*) and Helonias root (Rx. *Chamaelirii*).

### **2. Tonifies the Spleen, augments the Qi and stops diarrhea**

With its sweet, tonifying quality, Nettle's second important indication is Spleen-Stomach Qi deficiency. As a good all-round Spleen tonic, the herb addresses chronic Spleen deficiency with general weakness, loss of stamina, weight loss and loose stool. Three Chinese herbs are very similar here, all being sweet, neutral and tonifying in property: Shan Yao (Rx. *Dioscoreae oppositae*), Huang Jing (Rz. *Polygonati sibirici*) and Dang Shen (Rx. *Codonopsis*). Western similars include Parsley root (Rx. *Petroselinum*), Rosemary (Fm. *Rosmarini*) and Jamaica sarsaparilla (Rz. *Smilacis officinalis*).

Covering its first two functions so far, in Western terms Nettle is considered a metabolic and hepatic restorative, a hematogenic and an adrenocortical, thyroidal and gonadal restorative (toner).

Nettle also has a good effect in chronic diarrhea, and is especially useful when the diarrhea arises from the patterns Spleen deficiency, Spleen turbid-damp or Spleen damp-cold. This indication results from a combination of its sweet, tonifying and astringent, stabilising effects. Here it performs much like the similar sweet, astringent herbs Lian Zi (Sm. *Nelumbinis*) and Qian Shi (Sm. *Euryalis*), or Tormentil (Rz. *Potentillae*) and Stoneroot (Rx. *Collinsoniae*) among the Western herbs.

### **3. Braces the Kidney to contain urine, stop discharge and stop bleeding**

With its sweet, astringent quality, Nettle is traditionally also used for its ability to stabilise and astringe, and arrest various resultant discharges and bleeding in the lower warmer, like the herbs in the corresponding Chinese category. This implies essentially a Kidney tonifying function that allows it to treat Kidney deficiency with chronic urinary and/or vaginal discharges, dysuria and chronic bleeding. In this syndrome the herb mimics similars such as Lian Zi (Sm. *Nelumbinis*), Xu Duan (Rx. *Dipsaci*) and Hai Piao Xiao (*Os Sepiae seu Sepiellae*), as well as the Western options Buchu (Fm. *Barosmae*), Poplar bark (Cx. *Populi*) and Kava root (Rz. *Piperis methystici*).

Nettle astringes to stop bleeding in general, and therefore applies to a broad range of hemorrhagic conditions, incl. menorrhagia, metrorrhagia, hematochezia and epistaxis. It can be seen as a somewhat milder version of Xian He Cao (Hb. *Agrimoniae pilosae*), a good all-round hemostatic herb. Other similar herbs from

the West include Lady's mantle (Hb. *Alchemillae vulgaris*), Shepherd's purse (Hb. *Capsellae*) and Butcher's broom (Rz. *Rusci aculeati*). Nettle has also proven very useful for hemoptysis, whether from Lung Yin deficiency, chronic Lung phlegm, etc., as well as helping to control chronic cough and wheeze in these patterns. The comparison must go to Bai Ji (Rz. *Bletillae*) and E Jiao (Gel. *corii Equi asini*). Western similar herbs include Horsetail (Hb. *Equiseti*) and Chickweed (Hb. *Stellariae*).

#### **4. Clears damp-heat and relieves strangury**

Astringent, salty and entering the Kidney and Bladder channels, Nettle also has the ability to treat damp-heat in the lower warmer or Bladder. This despite the fact that it is generally a neutral herb. Nettle is especially indicated with urinary irritation and strangury-especially Blood, heat and stone lin-present. Che Qian Zi (Sm. *Plantaginis*) and Dong Kui Zi (Sm. *Abutili seu Malvae*) (both also sweet) are the obvious comparisons here, as well as Western herbs such as Cleavers (Hb. *Galii*) and Wild carrot seed (Fr. *Dauci*).

#### **5. Dispels wind-damp from the channels and skin**

Another solid traditional use for this herb is chronic rheumatic and skin conditions, which in this context must be attributed to wind and damp pathogens. Nettle therefore addresses wind-damp obstruction of the channels causing chronic muscle and joint pains, like Sang Ji Sheng (Rm. *Loranthi*) and Wu Jia Pi (Cx. *radicis Acanthopanax*). Western similars would include Celery seed (Fr. *Apii*) and Horsetail (Hb. *Equiseti*).

In patterns of wind-damp invading the skin, causing skin eruptions (eczema), Nettle acts like Hai Tong Pi (Cx. *Erythrinae*) and Xi Xian Cao (Hb. *Siegesbeckiae*), or possibly Cleavers (Hb. *Galii*) and Burdock (Rx. *Arctii*).

In Western terms, Nettle has alterative and detoxicant (depurative) actions.

#### **6. Softens hardness and dissolves deposits**

This little-known use makes sense in view of the herb's salty taste quality, which is related to its high content in minerals and trace elements. With its softening function, Nettle can help reduce hard deposits and nodules, such as urinary stones, gallstones and hard lymphatic swellings. The comparison here two-fold: firstly with the stone-expelling herbs, e.g. Jin Qian Cao (Hb. *Lysimachiae*) and

Shi Wei (Fm. Pyrrosiae); secondly with the phlegm-nodule treating herbs, e.g. Fu Hai Shi (Lapis Pumicis seu Costaziae) and Hai Ge Ke (Ca. Cyclinae seu Meretricis).

### **Precautions**

Nettle is a mild remedy with no chronic toxicity and may be used freely.

### **Preparation**

The basic preparation for Nettle is the long hot water infusion (e.g. 20 minutes) or the short decoction (5-10 minutes). It can simply be added to a formula just before the end of decocting time.

Nettle can also be given in the convenient tincture form and is available as such from various suppliers.

### **Dosage**

The dosage is somewhat higher than average: 10-20 g for the long infusion or short decoction; 4-6 ml for the tincture.

### **Remarks**

Nettle is equally effective in all its functions with the exception of draining damp-heat and softening hardness, both of which are milder and more appropriate for mild cases or children's cases. Nettle root (Rx. Urticae) is another traditional herb whose main function is to stabilise and astringe, and as such is also used today for treating prostate congestion with hyperplasia.

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