

Yard and Garden – 08-22-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Ouch! They sting and they hurt. One generally encounters these menacing pests when out hiking, but a few days ago I was stung on the hand while watering the potted plants on our deck. The initial pain was intense. My hand quickly inflamed and itched fiercely. Attempting to provide relief, I hastily ran cold water over the area and avoided scratching it. Nearly an hour passed before the irritation ceased.

Some people are extremely allergic to its sting; whereas, others barely notice. I must be one who is definitely allergic to its toxin. Years ago I encountered this stinging menace. I readily recall when I was in Boy Scouts, over fifty years ago, I was stung while on a camping trip. Wearing shorts, I had hiked through an area where many resided. The result — burning, itching legs. The pain seemed to last for an eternity. I cautioned myself to always be on the lookout for this danger, but obviously I forgot.

One might think I'm writing about bees and their ability to inflict painful stings. Not the case. I'm writing about a plant that botanists call *Urtica dioica*, more commonly known as stinging nettles.



The interesting thing about this current encounter was the manner in which it happened. I certainly didn't expect to come across its path while watering flowers on my deck. Furthermore, I am bewildered as to how this plant grew there. If you'll notice I said, "Grew." I have now destroyed the plant, but I captured a few photos for this article before I obliterated it.

As summer progresses, most potted plants outgrow their containers and cascade over the edges of the pot, completely concealing the surface of the soil. In order to thoroughly water these plants, I usually take my left hand and gently lift the cascading portion high enough to expose the rim of the pot. Holding the plant in this manner allows me to add water directly to the soil surface and avoid runoff which usually happens when I attempt to apply water over the top of the foliage.

The stinging nettle I encountered was growing in a pot of annual flowers we'd been nurturing since April. Not noticing its presence, I thrust my left hand into its many tiny hypodermic needles, and instantly, I was in pain.



Urticaceae is the Latin name for the nettle family. A number of species exist within this group. Some are annuals; others are perennials. All are herbaceous, meaning non-woody, soft stemmed — those which die back to the soil when frost sets in.

The most common species of stinging nettle in Nebraska is *Urtica dioica*, commonly called tall nettle. This plant is

frequently found growing in low moist areas such as ditches, stream banks, vacant lots and ravines. What caused it to appear in one of my flower pots, I'll never know. The stems and leaves of this plant are covered with stinging hairs that contain formic acid, histamine, acetylcholine, serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine), and other unknown compounds. Stinging nettles have stout, ribbed, hollow stems and usually grow two to three feet tall. The somewhat oval, dark green, opposite leaves are a few inches long, with a rough, papery texture and very coarse teeth. The leaf tip is pointed, and its base is heart-shaped. The plant is dioecious meaning male and female flowers grow on separate plants.

Referring to my trusty reference book, *Weeds of the Great Plains* published by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, I discovered that early European settlers boiled the leaves of this plant and consumed it as a spring tonic. Apparently, boiling removes the irritating material. People have been using nettles for food, medicine, fiber, and dyes since the Bronze Age. If one were to collect them, it is advised to use work gloves and wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants.

I can assure you, I won't be purposely growing this plant for food in our garden; nor will I be out collecting it. This most recent stinging, painful encounter will suffice for another fifty years.