

Doon Watch for Dehradun Live, Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

Published on 16 January 2009

Bicchu Bootee -The Stinging Nettle

A few months ago, I was out in the outskirts of Dehradun in a forest, attempting to photograph a butterfly. The butterflies flitted about daintily and lead me on a wild goose chase over the hillside. Finally, on a steep hill slope, the butterfly sat down long enough for me to hope for a picture. Perilously positioned on the hill slope, the obvious happened. My foot slipped and down the hill I went. As luck would have it, I fell onto Stinging Nettle. Ouch- I was left with a frantic itch on all the parts of my body that had touched the plant!

While there are many species of nettles, the most commonly found plant is the Stinging Nettle *Urtica dioica* which is native to parts of Europe, Africa and Asia, The plant occurs quite commonly along roadsides at the edge of forests or near water throughout the Himalayan region including Dehradun. This herbaceous flowering plant grows up to a few metres in height. The plant's leaves and stem have many stinging hairs which if brushed against can itch like blazes as I can readily testify to after the fall described above! The hollow brittle hairs break off when brushed against and release chemicals into the skin causing the skin to swell and itch. The stinging nettles act as a defense mechanism for the plant, as cattle avoid grazing on the plant.



Just as nature creates a problem, it also provides the solution. There are numerous local remedies to provide relief to the itching. A little higher up in the Himalayas (above 4000 feet), the *Pahadi palak* (*Rumex nipalensis*), a plant with broad oblong leaves naturally occurs close to the nettle. When the leaves of this plant are rubbed onto the itching surface, they reduce the swelling and itchiness. With some species of nettle, doing the same with the root of the nettle plant has the same effect of healing. As kids whenever we played in the vicinity of “*Bicchu-bootee*” (meaning scorpion plant), we knew that remedy was close at hand, if we were ever stung. In the absence of either leaves or the root, applying spit or even mud with water and gently wiping the effected surface will assist to remove some of the nettles. Don’t scratch the effected area-this will only increase the itchiness!

Despite the Stinging Nettle’s mean sting, it has its own uses. The nettle is the food plant for the caterpillar of the butterfly Indian Red Admiral *Vanessa indica*. In the Western Himalayas, the soft parts of the nettle plant such as the stem are eaten as a vegetable.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the Stinging Nettle is called “*sessnu*” and its tender leaves are cooked along with flour and salt to make a healthy green broth. Recently, I had the opportunity to taste the preparation, and despite my trepidation, it tasted quite nice, and I had a second helping!

In many villages in Uttarakhand, the Stinging Nettle is also used as a fibre to make rope and sometimes even fabrics. The nettle is also said to have medicinal properties and is used to cure skin ailments and possibly even rheumatism.

It is amazing how nature provides it own checks and balances-even as the Stinging Nettle seems a “mean” plant on account of its stings, it provides humans with occasional food, fabric and medicine, thereby providing an incentive for its survival. If only humans were able to provide a natural check and balance to their lifestyles-balancing consumption with some sacrifices for the sake of the environment, we could collectively make the world a better place to live in!

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: For a change, buy clothes made of naturally occurring (hence easy to replenish) fibres like cotton, jute or even nettle!