

Q: My son accidentally touched stinging nettle plants and complained that his hand hurt for an entire day. How long does the pain usually last?

A: The formic acid injected into your son's hand by the very fine, needle like, hollow hairs on the undersides and stems of *Urtica dioica* (Stinging Nettle), leaves causes a painful stinging sensation that can last as long as a day. We are fortunate—in some parts of the world, there are stinging nettles that can cause pain that lasts for a year! There are about 500 species of nettle world-wide; most found growing in tropical climates. In California, the common Stinging Nettle grows in temperate, moist places. The perennial plants can each to 4' in height, with distinctive heart-shaped leaves terminating in a point, with toothed margins. Dioecious green flowers bloom from June to September. (Dioecious means flowers are either male or female)

Although not popular now, stinging Nettle has a long history and includes an abundance of different uses. The young leaves have been used as potherbs, the spring growth picked and steamed. The plant has been grown as a fibre source for clothing, cordage, string and paper prior to the production of flax and hemp. The herb's medicinal history is varied and complex. Nettles contain acetylcholine, calcium, chlorine, chlorophyll, formic acid, glucoquinones, histamine, iodine, iron, magnesium, potassium, serotonin, silicon, sulfur, tannin, and vitamins A, B, C and K. The plants have been a source of green and yellow dye. Oil from the seeds has been used as a light source, and the sap from the stems for waterproofing. The plants are picked when wearing heavy leather gloves for obvious reasons.

If you want to grow this herb, they prefer deep rich soils and regular moisture. Seeds are sown in the spring, barely covered with fine soil. Keep them damp until the true leaves appear. The plants can be transplanted in early summer. Mature clumps can be divided any time of year. Be wary—if the environment is right, the plants can be invasive and difficult to eradicate.

It does not help when your hands are burning, but assure your son that this is a very useful plant, a source of food, clothing and dye. The stinging sensation can be partially neutralized if rubbed with baking soda.