



Stinging Nettle grows in moist, shady places throughout the park system. Its bright green leaves and stems are covered with hollow hairs which come off easily when the plant is brushed. These hairs are filled with formic acid, the same acid ants have in their saliva glands, which causes an instant painful stinging sensation. Also, as the skin reacts, a rash forms lasting about a day. If you come in contact with stinging nettle: [\[more info.\]](#)

- Stinging nettle acid can be neutralized by applying a paste of baking soda (made by adding a little water). Apply to the infected area immediately.
- Human saliva may help when rubbed into the itchy area if baking soda is not handy.
- A local plant, the Curled Dock *Rumex Crispus*, grows in the same habitat as stinging nettle and can help when crushed and rubbed on the itchy area.

The Nettle tribe, Urticaceae, is widely spread over the world and contains about 500 species, mainly tropical, though several, like our common Stinging Nettle, occur widely in temperate climates. Many of the species have stinging hairs on their stems and leaves. Two genera are represented in the British Isles, *Urtica*, the Stinging Nettles, and *Parietaria*, the Pellitory. Formerly botanists included in the order Urticaceae the Elm family, *Ulmaceae*; the Mulberry, Fig and Bread Fruit family, *Moraceae*; and that of the Hemp and Hop, *Cannabinaceae*; but these are now generally regarded as separate groups.

The British species of Stinging Nettle, belonging to the genus *Urtica* (the name derived from the Latin, *uro*, to burn), are well known for the burning properties of the fluid contained in the stinging hairs with which the leaves are so well armed. Painful as are the consequences of touching one of our common Nettles, they are far exceeded by the effects of handling some of the East Indian species: a burning heat follows the sensation of pricking, just as if hot irons had been applied, the pain extending and continuing for many hours or even days, attended by symptoms similar to those which accompany lockjaw. A Java species, *U. urentissima*, produces effects which last for a whole year, and are even said to cause death. *U. crenulato* and *U. heterophylla*, both of India, are also most virulent. Another Indian species, *U. tuberosa*, on the other hand, has edible tubers, which are eaten raw, boiled or roasted, and considered nutritious.

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Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

Stinging nettle is difficult to harvest, but has a wealth of uses. When the Romans invaded Europe and Britain, they brought nettles with them, believing they would need them to beat themselves to keep warm. They were also used in this way on areas affected by arthritis or rheumatism. (1) The young leaves may be eaten as a "green, leafy vegetable" and are a good source of minerals. (1,2) The fibers from the stalks were used to make cloth, rope, fishing nets and whatever else needed to be sewn before flax and hemp came along. (2) An herbalist acquaintance of mine recommends nettle leaf tea to save the complexion from a chocolate binge. Nettle tea can also be used as a base for other drink mixes and juice concentrates for improved nutrition.

There are over 500 species of nettles, some of which have a sting so bad, it lasts for months and may cause death. The common stinging nettle may be found throughout Europe, Asia east to Japan and in Africa, Australia and the Andes Mountains in South America as well as in North America. (2) The plant grows to 2 or 3 feet and is covered with down as well as stinging hairs. The leaves are heart-shaped and come to a point. The flowers are green and bloom from June to September. There are male and female flowers usually on separate plants. The whole plant is useful and may be gathered just before blooming. (2)

Formic acid and histamine cause the characteristic sting from the common nettle. (1) The juice from the plant is one of the remedies to counteract the sting. Yellowdock or curly dock can also be used to antidote the sting as can rosemary, mint and sage. (2) Regular toothpaste may also help neutralize the formic acid.

Why is the nettle such an important medicinal herb if it is so difficult to harvest? It is very good at gathering minerals from the ground, which are much needed to treat many imbalances in the body. 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 (1,3,4) They have a cooling energy, and are drying and astringent. (1) The aerial parts may be used as an astringent, diuretic, expectorant, hemostatic (stop bleeding), circulatory stimulant, nutritive tonic, improve milk flow for nursing, lower blood sugar levels, treat gout and arthritis, and prevent scurvy. (1,3) The combination of iron and vitamin C is useful in treating anemia, because the vitamin C improves iron absorption from the GI tract. (1) When boiled, they have also been used as a green dye. (2) The root is used in combination with other herbs such as saw palmetto and pygeum to relieve symptoms of benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH). It has also been used as a conditioner for dandruff and hair loss. (1) When mixed with salt and boiled it produces a yellow dye. (2) Nettles are also helpful in relieving the symptoms of hayfever and other allergic reactions that produce increased congestion in the sinuses. (3) The mineral content makes nettles helpful for goiter, osteoporosis, muscle cramps, high blood pressure and malabsorption syndrome. Almost any condition that requires improved mineral balance will benefit from nettles.

Nettles may be used as a tea, tincture, compress, in ointment or powdered, depending on the area of use. The root may be tinctured or simmered in water to make a decoction. The young sprouts in spring may be prepared as a vegetable or added to soup. A type of beer was made with the young sprouts in earlier times. (2) A recipe for Nettle Pudding and Nettle Beer may be found in our Recipes section. A cup or two of nettle tea drunk daily will help with gout, rheumatism, eczema, milk production, and heavy menstrual or other internal bleeding. (1) An infusion of nettles and red clover, mixed in equal proportions, helps cleanse the blood and is useful in treating acne. A compress soaked in nettle tea may be applied to arthritic joints, tendinitis, sprains and sciatica to relieve pain. Because of its astringency, nettles may be made into an ointment for hemorrhoids or the tea may be used in a sitz bath. Powdered nettle leaves may be inhaled like snuff to stop nosebleeds. The juice from the whole fresh plant may be used to antidote the sting and as a tonic for debilitated conditions or for a weak heart with fluid retention. (1) Maude Grieve offers a recipe

for Nettle Hair Tonic: "Simmer a handful of young Nettles in a quart of water for 2 hours, strain and bottle when cold. Well saturate the scalp with the lotion every other night. This prevents the hair from falling and renders it soft and glossy." (2) The root may be used similarly.

Although nettles have no known side effects, there are some potential interactions to be aware of with certain prescription medications. Because of its vitamin K content, it has the potential to decrease the effectiveness of blood-thinning medications. It may increase the effectiveness of diuretics and medications that lower blood pressure. This should be watched in very elderly people who are more likely to lose their balance easily when blood pressure is too low. Nettles may also increase the effectiveness of anti-diabetic drugs commonly used in adult-onset diabetes. It has a hypoglycemic effect of its own. Nettles may still be used in any of these conditions, but a consistent daily amount should be taken to allow for adjustments in medications if necessary.

Stinging nettle is truly a useful herb even if it is a pain to pick. It is one of the best sources of minerals and has a wide variety of uses. It may even be considered a food when picked in the spring. Of course, don't forget your gloves.

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Urtica dioica

Common name:	Stinging nettle	Family:	Urticaceae
Author:	L.	Botanical references:	17, 200
Synonyms:			

Known Hazards:	The leaves of the plants have stinging hairs, causing irritation to the skin [21, 200]. This action is neutralized by heat or by thorough drying, so the cooked leaves are perfectly safe and nutritious [200]. However, only young leaves should be used because older leaves develop gritty particles called cystoliths which act as an irritant to the kidneys [172].
Range:	Britain.
Habitat:	Waste ground, hedgerows, woods etc, preferring a rich soil and avoiding acid soils [4, 9].
Plants For A Future Rating (1-5):	5

Other Common Names:	From various places around the Web, may not be correct. See below . Bigstring Nettle [E], Common Nettle [L], Common Stinging Nettle [H], Gerrais [E], Greater Nettle [H], Grote Brandnetel [D], Isirgan [E], Kazink [E], Nabat Al Nar [E], Nettle [H], Nettle, Stinging [S], Nettle, Common [E], Ortiga Mayor [E], Stinging Nettle [S,E,B,L,H,P], Stinging Nettles [S],
Epithets:	From a Dictionary of Botanical Epithets dioica = dioecious (lit. 2 houses referring to male and female parts on different plants);
Other Range Info:	From the Ethnobotany Database Britain; Canada(Kwakiutl); Canada(Nootka); Czechoslovakia; Europe; India; Iraq; Kurdistan; Spain; Turkey; Us; Us(Flathead); Ussr

Physical Characteristics

Perennial growing to 1.2m by 1m at a fast rate. It is not frost tender. It is in leaf from March to November, in flower from May to October, and the seeds ripen from June to October. The flowers are dioecious (individual flowers are either male or female, but only one sex is to be found on any one plant so both male and female plants must be grown if seed is required) and are pollinated by Wind. The plant not is self-fertile. It is noted for attracting wildlife. We rate it 5 out of 5 for usefulness.

The plant prefers light (sandy), medium (loamy) and heavy (clay) soils. The plant prefers acid, neutral and basic (alkaline) soils. It can grow in semi-shade (light woodland) or no shade. It requires moist soil. The plant can tolerate strong winds but not maritime exposure.

Habitats and Possible Locations

Meadow, Hedgerow, Woodland, Sunny Edge, Dappled Shade, Shady Edge.

Edible Uses

Colouring; Curdling agent; Drink; Leaves.

Young leaves - cooked as a potherb and added to soups etc [1, 2, 9, 12, 13, 36, 183]. They can also be dried for winter use [12]. Nettles are a very valuable addition to the diet [244], they are a very nutritious food that is easily digested and is high in minerals (especially iron) and vitamins (especially A and C) [4, 201, 238]. Only use young leaves (see the notes above on toxicity) and wear stout gloves when harvesting them to prevent being stung. Cooking the leaves, or thoroughly drying them, neutralizes the sting, rendering the leaf safe to eat [4, 244]. The young shoots, harvested in the spring when 15 - 20cm long complete with the underground stem are very nice [85]. Old leaves can be laxative [5].

The plants are harvested commercially for extraction of the chlorophyll, which is used as a green colouring agent (E140) in foods and medicines [238].

A tea is made from the dried leaves; it is warming on a winter's day [21, 183]. A bland flavour, it can be added as a tonic to China tea [238].

The juice of the leaves, or a decoction of the herb, can be used as a rennet substitute in curdling plant milks [183].

Nettle beer is brewed from the young shoots [200].

Medicinal Uses

[Disclaimer](#)

Antiasthmatic; Antidandruff; Astringent; Diuretic; Galactagogue; Haemostatic; Hypoglycaemic; Stings; Tonic.

Nettles have a long history of use in the home as an herbal remedy and nutritious addition to the diet [K]. A tea made from the leaves has traditionally been used as a cleansing tonic and blood purifier so the plant is often used in the treatment of hay fever, arthritis, anaemia etc [254].

The whole plant is antiasthmatic, antidandruff, astringent, depurative, diuretic, galactagogue, haemostatic, hypoglycaemic and a stimulating tonic [4, 9, 21, 36, 165, 238]. An infusion of the plant is very valuable in stemming internal bleeding [4], it is also used to treat anaemia, excessive menstruation, haemorrhoids, arthritis, rheumatism and skin complaints, especially eczema [238]. Externally, the plant is used to treat skin complaints, arthritic pain, gout, sciatica, neuralgia, haemorrhoids, hair problems etc

[238].

The fresh leaves of nettles have been rubbed or beaten onto the skin in the treatment of rheumatism etc [257]. This practice, called urtification, causes intense irritation to the skin as it is stung by the nettles. It is believed that this treatment works in two ways. Firstly, it acts as a counter-irritant, bringing more blood to the area to help remove the toxins that cause rheumatism. Secondly, the formic acid from the nettles is believed to have a beneficial effect upon the rheumatic joints.

For medicinal purposes, the plant is best harvested in May or June as it is coming into flower and dried for later use [4, 238].

This species merits further study for possible uses against kidney and urinary system ailments [222].

The juice of the nettle can be used as an antidote to stings from the leaves and an infusion of the fresh leaves is healing and soothing as a lotion for burns [4].

The root has been shown to have a beneficial effect upon enlarged prostate glands [254].

A homeopathic remedy is made from the leaves [4]. It is used in the treatment of rheumatic gout, nettle rash and chickenpox, externally is applied to bruises [4].

We have a more details factsheet on nutritional and health benefits of this plant. Email webmaster@pfaf.org for details.

Other Uses

Biomass; Compost; Dye; Fibre; Hair; Liquid feed; Oil; Repellent; Waterproofing.

A strong flax-like fibre is obtained from the stems [200]. Used for making string and cloth [1, 4, 6, 13, 36], it also makes a good quality paper [115]. It is harvested as the plant begins to die down in early autumn and is retted before the fibres are extracted [4, 99]. The fibre is produced in less abundance than from flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) and is also more difficult to extract [4].

The plant matter left over after the fibres have been extracted are a good source of biomass and have been used in the manufacture of sugar, starch, protein and ethyl alcohol[4].

An oil obtained from the seeds is used as an illuminant [4].

An essential ingredient of 'QR' herbal compost activator [32]. This is a dried and powdered mixture of several herbs that can be added to a compost heap in order to speed up bacterial activity and thus shorten the time needed to make the compost [K]. The leaves are also an excellent addition to the compost heap [12, 18, 20] and they can be

soaked for 7 - 21 days in water to make a very nutritious liquid feed for plants [54]. This liquid feed is both insect repellent and a good foliar feed [14, 18, 53].

The growing plant increases the essential oil content of other nearby plants, thus making them more resistant to insect pests [18, 20, 54].

Although many different species of insects feed on nettles, flies are repelled by the plant so a bunch of freshly cut stems has been used as a repellent in food cupboards [4].

The juice of the plant, or a decoction formed by boiling the herb in a strong solution of salt, will curdle milks and thus acts as rennet substitute [4]. This same juice, if rubbed into small seams of leaky wooden tubs, will coagulate and make the tub watertight again [4].

A hair wash is made from the infused leaves and this is used as a tonic and antidandruff treatment [172, 201].

A beautiful and permanent green dye is obtained from a decoction of the leaves and stems [4, 115].

A yellow dye is obtained from the root when boiled with alum [4, 115].

Cultivation details

Prefers a soil rich in phosphates and nitrogen. Plants must be grown in a deep rich soil if good quality fibre is required [4, 115].

Nettles are one of the most undervalued of economic plants. They have a wide range of uses, for food, medicines, fibres etc and are also a very important plant for wildlife. There are at least 30 species of insects that feed on it and the caterpillars of several lepidoptera species are dependant upon it for food [30]. Especially when growing in rich soils, the plant can spread vigorously and is very difficult to eradicate. It is said that cutting the plant down three times a year for three years will kill it [4]. It is a good companion plant to grow in the orchard and amongst soft fruit [53, 54]. So long as it is not allowed to totally over-run the plants, it seems to improve the health of soft fruit that grows nearby and also to protect the fruit from birds, but it makes harvesting very difficult.

Dioecious. Male and female plants must be grown if seed is required.

Propagation

Seed - sow spring in a cold frame, only just covering the seed. Prick out the seedlings into individual pots when they are large enough to handle, and plant them out in the summer.

Division succeeds at almost any time in the growing season. Very easy, plant them straight out into their permanent positions.

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This page http://www.ibiblio.org/pfaf/cgi-bin/arr_html?Urtica+dioica (US)

Full-Size Image of Stinging Nettle Hairs





Photo by Dr. John Meade, weed scientist emeritus
Rutgers Cooperative Extension

Stinging Nettle
Urtica dioica



Growing mostly in wet areas it also causes an itching skin rash but it is less severe than poison-ivy and disappears in about 24 hours. Note the opposite leaves with sharp serrations along the edge. Close examination will reveal the hypodermic like needles which break off and inject a histamine and acetyl choline to cause the rash.

Photo by Dr. John Meade, weed scientist
emeritus
Rutgers Cooperative Extension

Nettles
(*Urtica species,*
***Laportea canadensis*)**

**From *Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal
Plants in Wild (and Not So Wild) Places***



These annual or perennial native and European herbaceous plants are distinctive for many reasons, as you'd quickly discover if you ever encountered them wearing shorts. Nettles are covered with tiny, nearly invisible stinging hairs that produce an intense, stinging pain, followed redness and skin irritation. The generic name comes from the Latin word, "uro," which means "I burn." Nevertheless, they're superb, non-stinging, cooked vegetables.

Nettles usually appear in the same places year after year. Look for them in rich soil, disturbed habitats, moist woodlands, thickets, along rivers, and along partially shaded trails. They grow throughout most of the United States Here are a few of the most common species:

Stinging Nettle in Flower

pen and ink
"Wildman"

Stinging nettle's (*Urtica dioica*) rather stout, ribbed, hollow stem grows 2-4 feet tall. The somewhat oval, long-stalked, 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.



Young Stinging Nettle

Photo by "Wildman"

This is a dioecious plant, with male and female flowers growing on separate plants. The species name, *dioica*, means "two households" in Greek: By late spring, some plants have clusters of tiny, green female flowers, hanging from the leaf axils in paired strands. Other plants possess diagonally upright male flower strands, poised at the tops of the plants. Slender nettle (*Urtica gracilis*) is similar, with sparse stinging hairs and slender, opposite leaves.

Wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*) has fewer stinging hairs. The leaves are alternate rather than opposite—they're larger and wider, with more rounded bases than the ones stinging nettles have. Wood nettle has flower clusters on top as well as in the leaf axils. Other true nettle species are also edible.



Young Wood Nettle
Photo by "Wildman"

You'd think the stinging hairs would make nettle identification easy. Nevertheless, I once ran into some people in the woods who insisted that clearweed (*Boehmeria cylindrica*), a similar-looking, nonpoisonous relative, with a translucent stem, and no stinging hairs, was stinging nettles. They had been eating this nontoxic plant, which I had always rejected as unpalatable, all summer.

Sometimes nettles grow near catnip, another similar-looking plant. Mints, of course, have no stinging hairs, and catnip is fragrant. Catnip and nettles are an excellent combination for herb tea.

Collect nettle leaves before they flower in spring. They may be bad for the kidneys after they flower. New nettles come up in the fall, and you can pick them before they're killed by frost.

People have been using nettles for food, medicine, fiber, and dyes since the Bronze Age. Collect them using work gloves, and wear a long-sleeved shirt. If you happen upon nettles when you have no gloves, put your hand inside a bag. The young leaves are the best part of the plant. They come off most easily if you strip them counter-intuitively, from the top down.

Whenever any of my tour groups find nettles, I announce that someone will volunteer to get stung, to demonstrate how jewelweed cures the rash. Sure enough, someone accidentally gets stung, and we cure it. Once I was the careless one who got stung, but I kept my mouth shut treated myself surreptitiously. Plantain and dock also work. "Nettle in, dock out!," say the English. Surprisingly some people (masochists?) actually find nettle stings invigorating, and use them to wake up the body.

I have to travel quite a distance to find a place where they grow like "weeds." As you can imagine, I pick in quantity, steam them, freeze them, put them in soups, stews, and other dishes. I dry them, tincture them in alcohol, and sometimes get stung by them. They get used up quickly—everyone loves them—and I'm back at the nettle patch soon enough.

Clean and chop nettles wearing rubber gloves. Once you've cooked them a little, the stingers are deactivated, and the plant becomes wonderfully edible.

Nettles have a bad reputation as an unpleasant-tasting survival food in some circles. That's because people don't know how to prepare them. They often boil them, which is awful. Nettle leaves are good simmered in soups 5-10 minutes, but my favorite method is the waterless steaming method, recommended for spinach in a 1699 cookbook by John Evelyn, and described in the cooking section.

I enjoy nettles as a vegetable side-dish with rice and beans. Sometimes I make creamed nettles—much more satisfying than creamed spinach. Because nettles



Young Stinging Nettles

Photo by "Wildman"

Ristorante Oliviero - Via delle Terme, 51r - Florence 3/94
Chicken livers with stinging nettles and pine kernels

Serves 6

Ingredients:

400 gr. flour

200 gr. stinging nettle tops

3 eggs

400 gr. prepared chicken livers

2 spoons toasted pine kernels

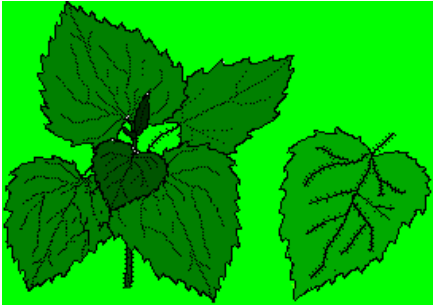
1 bunch spring onions

Vin Santo, butter, salt and pepper

Boil the stinging nettles. Drain and crush to remove as much liquid as possible, put through liquidizer or processor, then mix with the beaten eggs. Make some pasta pastry in the normal way and leave it to stand. Roll out and prepare the taglierini (narrow strips of thinly rolled pastry). Gently cook the chopped spring onions in the butter until soft. Chop the livers into cubes and cook in butter in another pan to seal them, adding the Vin Santo for flavour once they are cooked. Last of all add the pine kernels and onions. Check the seasoning of the taglierini and mix in together with the sauce. Add small knobs of fresh butter to bind together and parmesan cheese to taste.

The Stinging Nettle *Urtica dioica*

Most people who tromp through forests in the Pacific Northwest have, at one time or another, felt the reaction that stinging nettle causes on their skin. They often wonder



which of the many green plants caused their white itchy bumps and assume it was poison ivy. In fact, Poison Ivy does not grow in temperate coastal rainforests and so, in most cases, the culprit is probably the stinging nettle, *Urtica dioica*.

Stinging Nettles are perennials that belong in the nettle family Urticaceae and have opposite leaves. They are common in coastal areas of BC, Washington and Oregon and inland in south and central BC. They grow best in moist forests and prefer shady disturbed areas where they grow in patches. They are found at low elevations up to subalpine areas.

Plants in the nettle family and mint family are often confused with each other since some of the common names call members of the mint family by a nettle name. These include: hedge-nettle, hemp-nettle and dead-nettle. All members of the mint family have a stem that is square in cross-section. None of these listed above belong to the nettle family.

Stinging Nettles are one of the first forest floor plants to appear in the spring, usually in early March, sprouting up from under last fall's dead leaf litter. Each of its leaves are about 10 cm long, roughly heart-shaped (rounded at one end and taper to a point at the other) and have large teeth around the leaf edge (which I think of as reaching out to bite you). They also have tiny hollow hairs on the main stem, leaf stems and on veins on both upper and lower sides of the leaves.

In April, greenish clusters of tiny flowers hang down from the joint of the leaf stem and main plant stem. At this point, they have reached their full size of up to 3 m tall. Plant size tends to vary depending on the amount of light and moisture.

Flowers later develop into seeds which are blown off the parent plant and grow nearby. Stinging nettle also spread using rhizomes or underground roots that shoot out to the side.

When a human brushes by the plant and it touches their skin, the tiny hollow hairs break off and release an acid which irritates the skin and causes white itchy spots to appear. The degree and length of itchiness depends on the individual's skin sensitivity. Some people suffer for as long as 24 hours, while others only have the sensation for an hour or so.

Humans have thicker skin on their palms and this area is often immune to penetration of the acid due to the thicker skin. Back sides of hands, arms, legs and most other areas of the body are usually affected.

The acid is formic acid, the same acid ants have in their saliva glands. Like any acid, it can be neutralized by mixing it with a base. Applying a paste of baking soda made with a little water soothes the sting for most people if applied to the site immediately. I carry a small vial of baking soda for this purpose when hiking in the woods.

Human spit tends to be slightly basic and when rubbed into the itchy area will help if baking soda is not handy.

One local plant is basic and may be crushed and rubbed on the itchy area, providing the person is not allergic to the plant material. This plant is the Curled Dock *Rumex crispus* and grows in the same habitat as stinging nettle.

Stinging Nettle also has an interesting history as a useful plant. Fresh leaves were collected before they flowered, then dried completely, crushed and steeped in water to make a tea. When new leaves were collected in spring, and boiled in several changes of water, the resulting greens were said to make a good spinach substitute. Stems and leaves steeped raw in a bucket of water for 24 hours released the formic acid into the water. The stems were then removed and the water used as an organic pesticide and applied to plants with mites or aphids. First Nations used the pithy stems to make string and rope for fishnets, snares and tumplines.

The plant is also useful to wildlife. Red Admiral Butterflies lay their eggs on the undersides of leaves so the young will have a meal as soon as they hatch. Look for the holes they chew in the leaf by these voracious eaters!

by Donna Hill B.Sc. B.Ed. 1998