

# NETTLE

**THE WEATHER IS WARM**, the crops are beckoning and it's time for walking shorts. I learned early in my career that shorts are where it's at when walking crops. No wet trousers for me.

But there is a wee fish hook in my job. Occasionally I must deal with a crop that's infested with stinging nettle and there's no avoiding it, I'm going to get stung. In some parts of the country where the nettle problem is bad, it's actually preferable to suffer the wet pants all day than risk the stinging.

Stinging nettle (*Urtica urens*) is commonly found all over New Zealand. It's originally native to Europe and Asia but this charming weed has also spread to North America and parts of the Pacific. Stinging nettle belongs to the nettle family (*Urticaceae*) and even though we in New Zealand refer to *Urtica urens* as stinging nettle, it actually isn't. Its correct common name is the annual nettle or small nettle. The true stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) or common nettle is also found in New Zealand but is less common.

New Zealand also has a few other varieties of nettles: the tree nettle, the swamp nettle and the scrub nettle. All of these nettles form an important part of our ecology, providing habitat and food source for native butterflies like the Red Admiral.

Nettles do have some other uses:

- they can be used as a source of fibre for clothing;
- they have some herbal value;
- they can be added to various products like shampoos and conditioners;
- they are eaten in many countries, in soups and salads – pouring boiling water over the leaves stops the sting.

If you want to have a bit of a laugh, I suggest searching online for nettle eating contests. The latest champion ate through 26m of plant in an hour!

Stinging nettle is easy to identify in the field. It is an upright annual plant with quite distinctive jagged-shaped leaves.



### WHY IS IT A WEED?

It is a competitor of pastures, crops and gardens.

### WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All across New Zealand

### IS IT TOXIC?

No

### ALTERNATIVE USES

It's a food source for some caterpillars and is edible for humans too

All across each leaf are many long hairs and it's these that are responsible for the stinging action of the nettle. They are very sharp and loaded with a shot of rather nasty chemicals. When we brush against the hairs, these chemicals are injected into your skin, causing a pain reaction and for some also an immediate swelling reaction.

### HOW TO CONTROL NETTLES

The same sting that hurts us also means stock tend to avoid eating it.

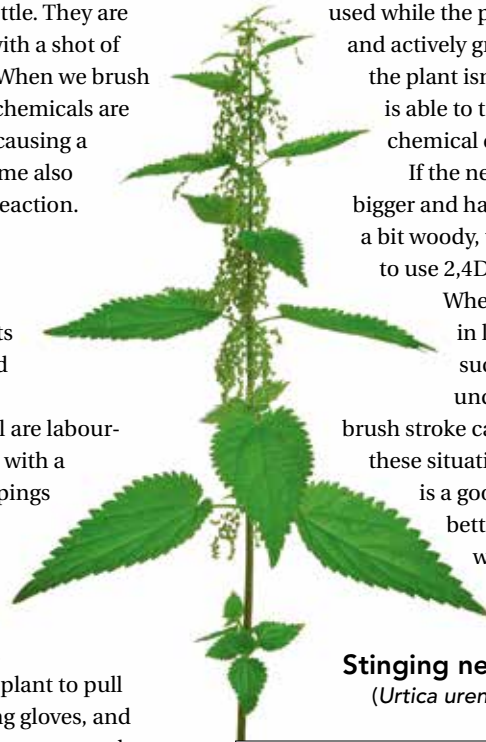
Other types of control are labour-intensive. Smothering it with a heavy layer of grass clippings or covering with sheets of black plastic might work. Mowing it off will retard its growth, but not stop it coming back. They are not the easiest plant to pull out of a garden – use long gloves, and you'll need to then dig down to get the spreading roots or it will come back. Nettle is also resistant to a number of chemicals, including glyphosate.

If the nettles are located in grass

paddocks, the best control is achieved using chemicals. MCPA can be used while the plants are young and actively growing because the plant isn't woody and is able to take up the chemical quickly.

If the nettles are a bit bigger and have started to go a bit woody, then you need to use 2,4D.

When the nettles are in less sensitive areas such as fence lines or under trees, a broad brush stroke can be used. In these situations, glufosinate is a good alternative and better than glyphosate which can struggle with nettles.



**Stinging nettle**  
(*Urtica urens*)

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