



Wild Ways Well and Nettles

Today's Wild Ways Well task is to go for a walk in your local greenspace and find some flowers, Paying particular attention to Nettles... Remember to follow the guidelines on Social Distancing, stay 2m apart from other people and only walk in your local area – and remember to wash your hands!

You'll **Be Active** by carefully walking outdoors (observing social distancing) keeping your mind busy and occupying your time looking for the amazing array of flowers and plants that are springing up in our greenspaces. You can find a lot of these in streets or gardens but a short walk will open up many more possibilities.

We can **Connect** with flowers by opening up our senses. Take in the colours, the smell, even the textures of the petals and leaves. Perhaps the plants you see are in an area where they have been deliberately planted or tended by people, either now or in the past.

We can **Keep Learning**, there are hundreds of web pages devoted to the plants and an equal number of books and television programmes. This pack will tell you a little about folklore and how plants live their lives. Why not look online and see what else you can learn?

Plants and flowers are all around us, and are vital to the ecosystem we all share but we rarely **Take Notice** and look very closely at them. It's amazing how much we miss out in nature when we just walk through without paying attention to what is around us.

We can **Give** by giving ourselves a break from the drama of the current events and focusing on the little things around us that give us pleasure and by sharing these with others, in person or online. We can give back by learning how to care for plants and how the plants we grow can help others.





Wild Ways Well



BE ACTIVE – Take part in health walks and practical outdoor activities. Explore your local paths, woods and greenspaces.

Spending time outdoors, amongst nature, makes people feel better about their lives.

The Wild Ways Well project encourages people suffering from, or at risk of, poor mental health to get outside for some daily exercise and experience nature.

Remember to observe Social Distancing, stay 2m apart and only walk in your local area.

Whilst out amongst the trees, parks and reserves you have a chance to slow down, relax and take your attention away from current events.

This guide will help you to try out some environmental and conservation related activities designed to fit in with the internationally recognised Five Ways to Wellbeing mental health framework.

CONNECT – Meet new people. Connect with the people, the wildlife and the nature that's all around us.



GIVE – Your time to be in nature. Give something back by sharing experiences and undertaking conservation tasks.

TAKE NOTICE – Note the changing cycles of life. Use your senses. Listen to birds, smell the flowers, live in the moment.



LEARN – Identify plants and wildlife, try new crafts, learn new skills. Discover things about nature and about yourself.





Wildflowers

What is a wildflower?

One answer might be that a wildflower is simply any plant which grows naturally in an area – though people have created wildflower meadows throughout history, and Cumbernauld Living Landscape still does today, our volunteers have planted thousands of wildflowers in places like Ravenswood, Broadwood and St Maurice's Pond. Others are spread by human action. Rosebay Willowherb has the old name's of Fireweed, Ironweed – reflecting the fact that it grows where people have been, in old settlements and along railways. During the Second World War it gained the name of 'Bombweed' as it was often the first plant to grow on the site of buildings which had been destroyed in the blitz.

When they think of wildflowers people will often picture fields full of colour but not all wildflowers have bright colours; grasses, nettles and docks are all wildflowers and are just as important, if not more so to the ecosystem – in fact many wildflowers which people plant today are actually non native and have little benefit for our native pollinators.

Other plants, which people might consider weeds, are really just wildflowers growing in a place where some people don't want them. Thistles, dandelions and willowherb for example.

Still other wildflowers are plants that conservationists try to remove as they actively damage our environment and outcompete native plants – Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and rhododendron would fall into this category.

There's really no correct answer, one person's wildflower is another's weed. This week's pack is about nettles, many people are wary of them but they're one of the best wildflowers around!





The Nettle

There is one widespread species of native nettle in the UK, *Urtica dioica*, the Common (or Stinging) Nettle. *Urtica* comes from Latin and means to 'sting' or 'burn' whilst *dioica* is Greek for 'two houses' and refers to the fact that a nettle plants are sexually dimorphic, being either male or female on separate plants, rather than both together. The common name may come from the Anglo Saxon word 'noedl' or 'needle', which may refer to the needle like stinging hairs, or to its use as fabric which could be sewn together.

Nettles are an understory plant, meaning they grow in partial shade, but they also like wet or damp areas. They do best in areas where there are lots of nutrients – this makes them a good indicator plant for human presence. Wherever humans have been improving the soil, nettles are sure to follow. Patches of nettles can mark old fields, buildings, gardens, or even burial sites long after other signs have vanished. They are upright perennials, growing up to 2m tall. They have opposite, toothed, leaves on square stems, both of which are covered in small, stinging, hairs. Tiny green flowers are borne on in dense clusters below the leaves and are wind pollinated. They can spread by rhizome (underground shoots) or by seed.

They are considered native to the UK, nettle fibres have been found in settlements dating back to 1600BCE.

John Gerard describes some of their uses in his 'Great Herbal' book of 1597

"Being eaten... boiled with perywinkles, it maketh the body soluble, doing it by a kinde of cleaning qualitie; it also provoketh urine, expelleth stones out of the kidneyes. Being stamped, and the juice put up the nostrils, it stoppeth the bleeding of the nose. The feed of nettle stir up lust, especially drunk with care fir it hath in it a certain windiness..."





Image from
Prof. Dr. Otto
Wilhelm
Thomé *Flora*
von
Deutschland,
Österreich
und der
Schweiz
1885, Gera,
Germany



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Nasty Nettles?

Nettles are hugely important for many insect species – and the reason why is all down to that sting! Nettle stings protect the plant from grazing animals, this is great for the plant, but as a by-product any insects that live on the nettle are also protected from being eaten! Many butterfly species (like peacock, comma, red admiral and small tortoiseshell), as well as ladybirds and aphids lay their eggs on nettles so that their young can grow up under its protection.

Nettles are also valuable for humans. For hundreds of years people have eaten nettles or made tea from the leaves, to benefit from the plentiful nutrients as well as supposed health giving benefits for issues like rheumatism and hay fever. Modern medicines for eczema and dandruff can be nettle based. People also used nettle fibre to make cloth – in Scotland the term ‘nettle cloth’ came to mean any finely woven material. It is tough and hardwearing, nettle cloth has been found in Bronze age settlements – and even as late as the First World War soldiers uniforms were often made at least partly from nettle fibres. Permanent green dye can be made from the leaves, and yellow dye from the roots so it was also used to colour cloth.

As if providing food for all those garden pest eating ladybirds wasn't enough, nettles are also the gardeners friend in other ways. They are brilliant on the compost heap and their leaves have natural antifungal properties meaning that wrapping garden fruit and veg in them helps keep it fresh. They can also be steeped in water to make ‘liquid manure’, a natural plant food that many gardeners swear by. Not only does this rich liquid food make plants grow stronger and faster, it also prevents fungal infections and deters many pest species.

Finally, nettles are also detectives! Nettles grow best where people have historically improved the ground by adding nutrients. Historians and archaeologists use this information– where you find a patch of nettles you also often find hidden signs of past human settlements.





Nettle Plant Food

Nettles are rich in nitrogen and make excellent plant fertiliser. To make your own Nettle feed to add to your garden plants simply follow these steps.

You'll need – nettles, a bucket (preferably with a lid), a heavy weight, and water.

- Gather together some nettles, use the stems and leaves, the younger the better.
- Crush and cut them. Using gloves scrunch up the stems and leaves, aiming to bruise and break the plant material as much as possible, then cut the plant up into small chunks.
- Immerse in water. Put your nettles in the bottom of a bucket and place a weight on top to hold them down. Then fill the bucket with water until the nettles are completely covered.
- Put the lid on the bucket – this bit is important, nettle plant food isn't known as liquid manure for nothing... it gets very, very smelly as it brews!
- Leave to brew. Put it somewhere safe (where you can't smell it) and leave for four weeks.
- Dilute. Your nettle soup should now be dark brown in colour. To make plant food you'll need to dilute it with 1 part nettle soup to 10 parts water. The finished mix should be the colour of tea.
- Water your plants liberally with the resultant mix, most garden plants will love it.
- Keep topping up. You can keep adding nettles to your soup mix all summer long – or at least as long as you can stand the smell!





Make Nettle Tea

Nettle tea has been a foragers favourite for generations. Nettles are naturally rich in Vitamins A, C and K as well as minerals like iron and potassium. So it can be a valuable addition to a healthy diet.

People have long claimed there are health benefits to drinking nettle tea, and there is some evidence that it may have anti inflammatory and diuretic properties.

The best time to harvest nettles is between March and October, older leaves tend to be sweeter and young leaves can be quite bitter.

- Collect leaves using gardening gloves and a pair of scissors
- Store the leaves in an envelope or brown paper bag if you have one (keeps them fresh)
- Wash nettle leaves in a colander and add to a pot or cup
- If using a kettle bring water to boil and pour into cup half filled with fresh leaves – leave for 5 minutes
- Alternatively add a cup full of leaves and four cups of water to a pot and bring to a boil, then turn off the heat and let it sit for 5 minutes
- Strain the concoction using a sieve to remove the leaves or if you like a stronger brew leave the leaves in the cup –this will depend on your own personal taste
- Add sweetener to taste
- It can be drunk hot or cold
- Sit back, put your feet up and enjoy!





Nettle Folklore

In Europe it was common practice for women to wash their hair in nettle juice, and it was believed nettles could both stimulate hair growth and prevent it (how the nettles knew which to do isn't clear!). Nettles are still considered a worthy ingredient by shampoo manufacturers today.

There were lots of beliefs about nettles as a healing plant. Many of these may relate to the fact that its sting can be rather distracting, making people forget about short term pains! It was also thought to have anti inflammatory properties, so good for issues like rheumatism and joint pain. Nettle juice is a diuretic, so teas and drinks would be made to flush out the body and it was thus believed it would be beneficial for kidney, blood and bladder disorders. Nettles are definitely rich in iron so may have had benefits for people with anemia, pregnant women and new mothers. It was also widely used as a cure for hayfever.

Probably because of its stinging qualities it was often associated with warriors... but also with old women, and probably for much the same reason!

Some people believed carrying nettles prevented ghost sightings (though again it may be that you were just so distracted by the nettle stings, you didn't notice the supernatural!).

It was associated with Thunder gods like Thor and Taranis (burning nettles in a fire would protect from lightning strikes), and also with snakes and the underworld. Loki, the trickster god, would spin his nets from nettle fibres.





Why Do Nettles Sting?

The one thing that most people will be able to tell you about nettles is that they sting! Most of us will have suffered a nettle sting at some point in our lives. Whilst this is painful it is usually fairly harmless for most people, with the itchy, stinging sensation fading after a few minutes or hours.

Nettles evolved their sting to protect themselves from predators like grazing animals (and us!). Underneath every leaf, and along the stems, there are thousands of tiny hollow silica tubes, which contain a mix of chemicals including formic acid, histamine and serotonin. The silica tubes are like tiny glass hypodermic needles, they can easily penetrate our skin, and when we brush against them they shatter, allowing the chemical mixture into our bodies.

The phrase 'grasping the nettle', meaning to be bold and tackle a difficult task directly, comes from the belief that crushing the fragile glasslike tubes of a nettles sting before they can penetrate your skin prevents any pain. This is a theory that has been held since at least the 16th century and was summed up by Aaron Hill in 1750

"Tender-handed stroke a nettle, And it stings you, for your pains: Grasp it like a man of mettle, And it soft as silk remains."

Many people swear by dock leaves as a natural remedy, and finding a dock leaf after being stung by a nettle is practically a British country tradition! Theories behind this include dock sap having a natural cooling effect, or that the pH levels of dock and nettle are opposites, meaning they cancel each other out. There has been some research into this but the results are inconclusive, there is no real evidence that dock leaves have any effect at all... except that people believe that they do! The Placebo effect (where a patients belief in the efficacy of a cure affects how well it works) is very real, it may be that dock leaves make us feel better because we all simply believe that it will! Another popular theory is that the actual act of going looking for a dock leaf can be very distracting – especially for children - and by the time the child has found a dock and has been suitably fussed over, the nettle sting effect has naturally worn off anyway.





Wildflowers to Spot this Week



Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*)– Low growing, native, creeping plant with bright green stems and clusters of deep violet flowers. Often found growing in lawns and roadside verges. A brilliant nectar plant for pollinators, it can also be eaten by people with a lettuce like taste. Its name harks back to when it was considered to be one of the very best healing plants (or ‘wound herbs’), with a huge list of believed benefits – including anticancer, antibacterial, astringent and diuretic properties. Modern research suggests it may have some use for protection of the liver.



Common Spotted Orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*)– The easiest orchid to see thanks to its habits of growing in woodland, roadside verges, sand dunes, marshes and even lawns. The leaves are green with purple spots. They appear at ground level and the flowers are borne on tall spikes with a cone of flowers at the top. Flower colour varies from white, to pink and through to purple, but all have dark pink spots and stripes on their three lobed petals. It was known as the ‘adder flower’ and its perfume is very attractive to day flying moths.














Buttercup (*Ranunculus* sp.)– The familiar species are the creeping, bulbous and meadow varieties. Shiny yellow flowers with lobed hairy leaves, they grow in meadows, pastures and damp places. Contrary to common belief all parts of buttercups are poisonous especially to cattle and to people. Children commonly hold the flowers beneath their chin to see the reflected colour – but doing so risks blisters from the toxic sap! The bright glow of the flowers attracts insects, and may also help to warm the plant’s reproductive systems



Look Out For Nettles

Spotting wildflowers is a great activity that anyone can try – and its almost as easy from your window or doorstep as it is on a walk! See how many of these things you can spot this week.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| • A patch of nettles! |  1pt |
| • A caterpillar on a nettle |  2pts |
| • A Peacock butterfly |  2pts |
| • A Small Tortoiseshell butterfly |  5pts |
| • A Comma butterfly |  10pts |
| • A ladybird on a nettle |  5pts |
| • A Buttercup |  1pts |
| • Selfheal |  2pts |
| • A Common Spotted Orchid |  5pts |
| • Any other Orchid species |  10pts |
| • Some nettle tea... |  10pts |

Total _____





Links

Go further with your Wild Ways Well activity by trying these links once you come home

Cumbernauld Living Landscape www.cumbernauldlivinglandscape.org.uk

Wild Ways Well www.cumbernauldlivinglandscape.org.uk/project/wild-ways-well

Activities www.cumbernauldlivinglandscape.org.uk/get-involved/activities/

Facebook www.facebook.com/CumbernauldLivingLandscape

Twitter www.twitter.com/wildcumbernauld

The Conservation Volunteers www.tcv.org.uk/scotland

The Scottish Wildlife Trust www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk

SamH www.samh.org.uk

NHS Five Ways Well www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing

MIND coronavirus and your wellbeing www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing

Lanarkshire Green Health Partnership www.elament.org.uk/media/2229/19-ways-to-stay-connected-2.pdf

Plantlife www.plantlife.org.uk/uk

Wildlife Trusts Wildflowers www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/wildflowers

Be Nice to Nettles www.nettles.org.uk



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