

## Edible *Urtica* spp. -

### New Zealand nettles

Bill Sykes, Christchurch

(excerpts from New Zealand Botanical Society Newsletter, # 72, June 2003)

...Turning to New Zealand, I agree with our President, who wrote the note on creamy nettle soup that started me off on the nettle trail, that the normally available nettle for eating here is *Urtica urens*, annual nettle, another widespread Northern Temperate species. *U. urens* is common to abundant in many gardens here, whereas although *U. dioica* grows in New Zealand it is scattered and uncommon and I have rarely seen it. However, *U. urens* makes a very acceptable substitute, and I often stir-fry it along with other wild greenery such as *Sonchus oleraceus*, puha, *Stellaria media*, chickweed, and the wild form of *Pastinaca sativa*, parsley.....

.....I naturally wondered what our *U. ferox*, ongaonga or tree nettle, would be like in the pan. This native species is more like the Himalayan *Gerardinia diversifolia* with similar very prominent bristly stinging hairs that cause more and longer-lasting pain than the other species mentioned. Since I regularly see plenty of *U. ferox* on Banks Peninsula I decided to 'give it a go'. Apart from having too thin gloves on when I collect some young tops all went well, but I still prefer the texture of *U. urens* for eating.....Now I see that in his 1981 book 'A field guide to the native edible plants of New Zealand' Andrew Crowe warns against *U. ferox* .....although extolling the virtues of eating the native *U. incisa*. ..... But I am reluctant to eat other native nettles.....because they are often rare or uncommon.....Even some populations of both *U. urens* and *U. ferox* on Banks Peninsula I browse gently so that I leave plenty for the caterpillars of our beautiful native butterflies the Red and Yellow Admirals.

A small quite incidental discovery that I made about *U. ferox* was that when the young tops are kept in a damp plastic bag in the fridge for a few days, as I do for other greenery that is not for immediate consumption, they lose virtually all their stinging capacity. Yet they appear to be just as fresh as when they were put in, including those long, white, rigid bristles, but they could be handled almost with impunity. This was definitely not the case with tops that were kept outside the fridge.....

### Nettles do almost lose their sting in the cold

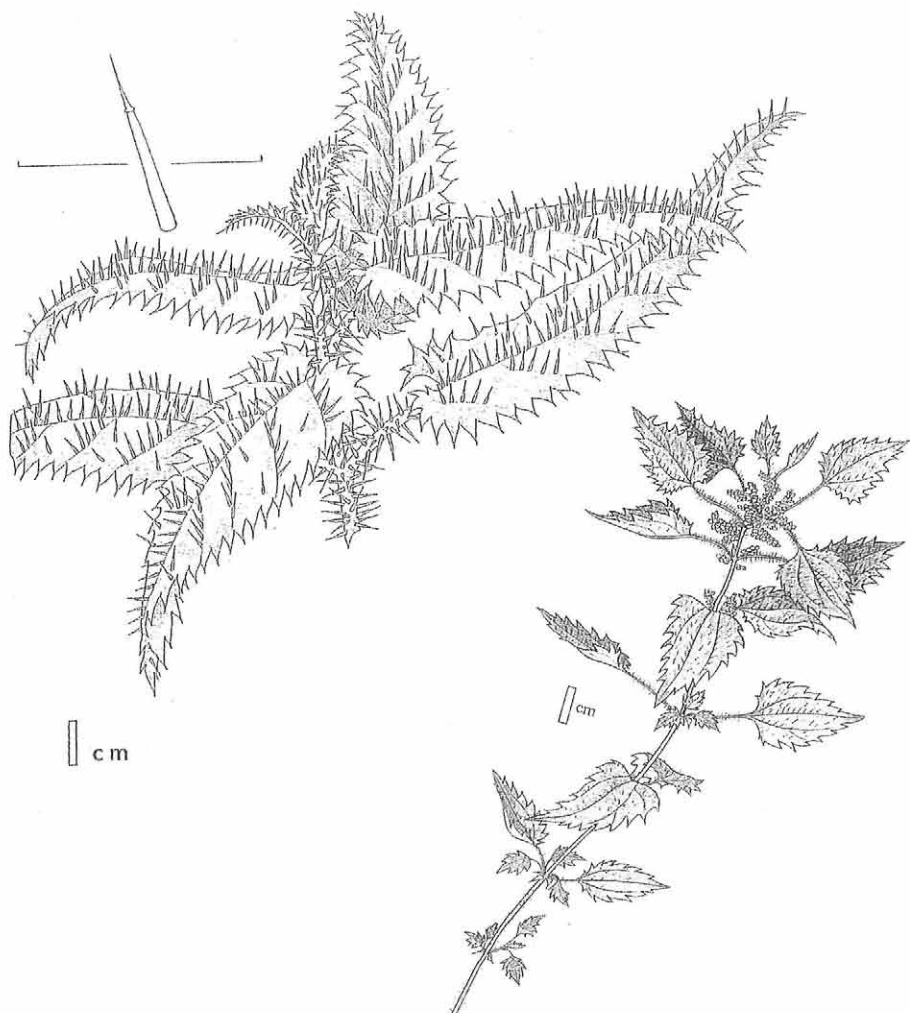
Allison Knight

By coincidence, I tramped last weekend with a friend in the snow on Banks Peninsula, from Gebbies Pass up the new track to the sign of the Pack Horse. Who should appear over the horizon there but David Glenny, who generously offered to drive us back to our car so we could complete the round trip.

As we walked through the snow down towards Kaituna Valley, we noticed David cautiously stroking the tips of that fierce native stinging nettle, *Urtica ferox*. When asked why he was tempting fate like that, David explained that Bill Sykes had discovered that a few days in the fridge appeared to inactivate most of the stinging

mechanism, so he was just testing to see whether a prolonged cold snap had the same effect in the field. It did. Intrigued, we cautiously stroked the frigid nettles ourselves, and even became bold enough to nibble a leaf or two. I have to say that to me it tasted like cardboard, and that my thumb tingled for 24 h after the sampling.

When I returned to Dunedin there was the latest NZ Bot.Soc Newsletter with Bill Sykes' article waiting to enlighten and inform me. I was pleased to see that he had underlined the word almost, and inspired to share the curious experience.



Tree nettle, ongaonga, *Urtica ferox* (shrub), above, and the native stinging nettle, *Urtica incisa* (herb), below. From Hugh D Wilson's field guide; Stewart Island Plants, Manuka Press, Christchurch, 1994