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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Pam Freir

Go Green. Be Sharp. Eat Nettles

According to folklore the Tibetan poet-saint, Milaraspa, lived for years on a diet of nettle soup (*satuk*). He eventually turned green and died. We're not told how long he lived or how he died. But the fact that he died dyed is easily explained: chlorophyll.

Nettles are loaded with it. (If you steam a batch and set it to drain in a colander lined with paper towels, the paper will turn a neon-bright green. Milaraspa green. A shade rather better suited to plants than people.)

So, what was behind such single-minded devotion to this prickly, unprepossessing plant? Because, Milaraspa would tell you, there's probably no growing thing that's as jam-packed with goodness as nettles. They are so rich in so many life-enhancing nutrients that one could conceivably live a good long time on the nourishment they provide. Besides, Milaraspa didn't have a lot of choice. He lived in a cave. He meditated. He had loftier matters on his mind than what to cook for dinner.

Nettles are the first of nature's greens to challenge winter's wrath. Plucky and exuberant and against all odds they emerge from the cold soil in early February. They grow like weeds, and they've long been treated like weeds which is really quite unfair because not only are they good food and good medicine, they are, as you'll see, the source of all manner of amusing and quirky diversions for a soggy, grey February day.

You must be alert when picking nettles. There's an old proverb, advocating bold measures in difficult times, that describes the recommended technique:

If you gently touch a nettle it will sting you for your pains; grasp it like a lad of nettle, and as soft as silk remains.

I've tried the bare-handed, go-for-the-throat approach. It's like sticking your arm into a hornets' nest and you have to thrash around looking for dock leaves to rub on your welts. Some people swear that if you rub a nettle rash with nettle juice the sting will disappear. It's a bit like applying a branding iron to a burn. I don't endorse that theory either. I wear gloves.

The word "nettle" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for "needle", a reference to the hypodermic-like action of the millions of tiny hairs that cover the leaves and stem. Each hair harbours a compound containing acetylcholine, histamine and formic acid—the latter being same stinging venom behind the painful bite of the red ant.

The marvel of this prickly plant is that its arrival seems orchestrated to coincide with the time we need it most. Nettles abound in Vitamins C and A. They are the richest land plant source of iron, the very ingredient our bodies crave in the enervating doldrums of winter's last days. And the nettle contains serotonin as well which could explain the sense of renewal and well-being we experience when we treat ourselves to this natural pick-me-up.

Nettles have been used to treat asthma, combat fevers and relieve the symptoms of arthritis and gout. The Roman legions, on duty in the damp and cold of England relied on nettles to fortify their tolerance to a hostile climate and treat rheumatic aches and pains.

There were other ancient and eccentric rites associated with nettles which might be

of some interest to those in search of a bit of jollity on a rainy day.

What you do, according to Roman custom, is pick yourself a sturdy bunch of nettles, take off your clothes, and proceed to beat yourself silly, concentrating as well as you can through the burning pain, on any area of the body in need of the nettle's energizing medicine—a rheumatic hand, an aching limb, whatever. One of the Romans' favourite forms of flagellation was to deliver vigorous sharp, stinging blows to the kidneys and sub-navel area in order to heighten sexual potency.

It's worth a try I suppose. Nettles are readily available. You don't need a prescription. And the procedure, though unorthodox, is entirely legal. On the other hand you could just pick them and eat them. Here is a nettle-fancier's tasty version of pesto:

Nesto

(for 4, or 1 lb. pasta)

4 cups firmly packed fresh young nettle leaves
2 cloves garlic, chopped
3 tbsp pine nuts (or chopped walnuts)
½ tsp salt
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
3 tbsp softened butter

Using kitchen tongs, or with gloved hands, place nettles in a steamer basket over boiling water.

Steam for 3 to 4 minutes until well wilted, then drain. Chop roughly and put them in the bowl of a food processor.

Add the garlic, nuts, salt and oil and whiz it all up until it's smooth. Add the cheese and butter and process again, briefly, until everything is well incorporated. Toss with cooked pasta and serve.

(Nesto is also wonderful in an omelet with goat cheese; in a quiche with roasted red peppers and shallots; or skimmed on thin round of oil-smearred toast.)

(This is an edited version of articles published previously in the Victoria Times Colonist.)

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Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: Why are some of our arbutus trees dying, while others are so healthy? At the northern end of their natural range, our arbutus trees sometimes succumb to the stress. Natural shading of this sun-loving species can cause dieback of the lower branches or the entire tree. Root damage by construction activities can send a tree into decline. Or the tree simply has trouble coping with everyday life. Surely we can understand that. An arbutus tree under stress is susceptible to fungal diseases. Three pathogens most likely to cause tree death are madrone canker (*Fusicoccum aesculi*), arbutus canker (*Natrassia mangiferae*), and a root rot (*Phytophthora cactorum*).

Madrone canker, also called branch dieback, begins at the branch tips and moves inward, blackening the branch as it goes. A symptom of water stress, this disease can sometimes be halted by watering the tree during dry periods, though it's tricky to avoid waterlogging. Dead branches can be removed and destroyed to prevent spreading of the fungus. Vigorous trees do not get this canker.

Arbutus canker is a natural canker that is typically sunken in the center, with a knot of callus developing around the edge. These cankers produce lumps and bumps that fascinate wandering naturalists and photographers. Only if the canker grows

large enough to girdle the stem does it cause dieback.

The root rot *Phytophthora cactorum* is responsible for a lethal disease of arbutus. Dark brown to black cankers appear at the base of the trunk, eventually girdling and killing the tree. As the trees decline, they will show various symptoms such as leaf discoloration and branch dieback.

But why this tree and not that one? Trees are as individual as we are, and why one of them (or us) dies young while another survives to decrepitude is the great unanswerable Natural Mystery.

This month's Natural Mystery: Why don't woodpeckers get headaches?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. Visit our website at <http://gulfnet.sd64.bc.ca/GalianoNaturalists.html>.