

Stinging Nettles of Florida: *Cnidoscolus*¹

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Classification

Scientific Name: *Cnidoscolus stimulosus* (Michx.) Engelm. & A. Gray

Common Name(s): bull-nettle, tread-softly, finger-rot, spurge-nettle

Family: Euphorbiaceae (spurge family)

Description

Perennial herbs covered with stinging hairs, milky sap, and tuberous roots. **Stems** erect to reclining, to 1m (3 ft.) tall, but usually shorter, branched or unbranched. **Leaves** alternate, bright green to dark green, irregularly and deeply 3- to 5-palmately divided (like a hand), coarsely toothed, 8-30 cm (3-12 in.) long and wide; leaf stalks (petioles) usually long. **Flowers** unisexual (male and female in the same cluster), 1.5 cm (0.5 in.) wide, with 5 white, petal-like structures (calyx lobes) and tubular base 1.5 cm (0.5 in.) long; several arranged in forked clusters terminating the stem. **Capsule** oval in outline, 3-parted, 1.5 cm (0.5 in.) long, explosively dehiscent to release 3 seeds; seeds oval in outline, 6 mm (0.25 in.) long, dark brown, mottled, with conspicuous swelling (caruncle) at one end. (Fig. 1).

Field Recognition Features: Erect plants covered with stiff stinging hairs; palmately 3- to 5-lobed leaves, conspicuous tubular-based white flowers in a cluster terminating the



Figure 1. Whole flowering plant of *Cnidoscolus stimulosus* (bull-nettle). Credits: Photo by Kent D. Perkins.

stem; 3-parted bristly capsule with 3 mottled seeds. Bloom-
ing all year in FL.

Distribution: FL: native; nearly throughout the state.

General: along the Coastal Plain from se VA to s FL, w to MS and e LA.

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Habitat: Dry, often sandy areas such as sandhills, dry woods, beaches, scrub, and disturbed areas (such as roadsides, fields, and lawns).

Similar Species

None, although species of *Urtica* (true stinging nettles) also have stinging hairs (see **Comments** below).

Toxicity

Irritant compounds that cause intense stinging and itching fill the long, stiff, hollow hairs on the stem, leaves, flowers, and fruits (Fig. 2). Although not intensively studied, the injection mechanism may be similar to that in *Urtica* species: each hair ends in a blunt tip that breaks off, permitting injection of the poison into the skin. Often a rash (or tiny red bumps) appear after the burning sensation wears off (usually less than 30 minutes). In sensitive individuals, the rash or dull purplish discoloration may persist for several days.



Figure 2. Stinging hairs of *Cnidoscolus stimulosus*. Left: leaf underside; Right: close-up of fruit.

Credits: Left: Photo by Kent D. Perkins; Right: Photo by Walter S. Judd.

Economic Uses

The starchy, tuberous roots are edible when cooked and taste like white potato. However, excavating the roots requires care since touching the above-ground plant parts (covered with stinging hairs) must be avoided. The milky sap has been used in herbal medicine.

Comments

The unrelated true nettles (species of *Urtica*) also have stinging hairs but are characterized by trailing weak stems, opposite triangular leaves, and minute greenish flowers

and fruit in congested clusters. A plant fact sheet for these species is also available.

Selected References

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