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Urtica dioica L. (Stinging Nettle): Morphological, Phytochemical, Cultivation Practices and Biological Potential: A Review

Nishant Thakur[1*], Mr. Pardeep Kumar[1], Dr. Abhishek Soni[1], Dr. Chinu Gautam[1]
Student, Corresponding Author[1]
M. Pharm in Pharmacology[2]
M. Pharm, PhD in Pharmaceutics, Dean of Pharmacy[3]
M. Pharm, PhD in Pharmacology, Hod of Pharm D[4]
School of Pharmacy, Abhilashi University, Mandi, HP, India
nt0518398@gmail.com, monu35908@gmail.com
abhisoni.phd@gmail.com, chinu990@gmail.com

Abstract: *Urtica dioica L., commonly known as stinging nettle, is a herbaceous perennial plant belonging to the family Urticaceae. Distributed across Europe, Asia, North Africa, and North America, this plant has been valued for centuries in traditional medicine systems for its remarkable therapeutic versatility. The present review brings together a comprehensive account of the botanical description, morpho-anatomical characteristics, phytochemical composition, cultivation requirements, and wide-ranging biological activities of U. dioica. The plant is particularly rich in polyphenols, flavonoids, alkaloids, tannins, and bioactive sterols, which collectively underpin its anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antioxidant, immunomodulatory, anti-diabetic, and anti-allergic properties. Clinical investigations have substantiated traditional claims relating to its utility in managing benign prostatic hyperplasia, allergic rhinitis, arthritis, and hyperglycemia. Despite its considerable therapeutic promise, challenges related to standardization of extracts, variability in phytochemical content due to environmental factors, and limited molecular-level characterization continue to hinder its full pharmaceutical integration. This review serves as a scholarly reference for researchers, clinicians, and pharmaceutical scientists seeking to explore evidence-based applications of this remarkable medicinal plant.*

Keywords: Urtica dioica; Stinging Nettle; Phytochemistry; Antimicrobial Activity; Anti-inflammatory; Biological Potential; Traditional Medicine; Medicinal Plants

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the numerous plants that have carved a niche in both conventional and alternative medicine, Urtica dioica L. — popularly known as stinging nettle — stands out as a particularly compelling subject of scientific inquiry. Belonging to the family Urticaceae, this herbaceous perennial has woven itself into the fabric of human civilization for thousands of years, appearing in the medicinal traditions of the Balkans, ancient Persia, Native American cultures, and European folk healing practices alike. What makes this plant especially intriguing is the apparent contradiction it presents: on one hand, a plant notorious for the sharp, burning sensation it inflicts upon skin contact; on the other, a botanical powerhouse laden with compounds that heal, protect, and nourish.

The stinging sensation that gives U. dioica its name is caused by specialized hollow trichomes — microscopic hair-like structures — that act much like hypodermic needles when touched. These trichomes inject a cocktail of bioactive substances including histamine, formic acid, acetylcholine, and acetic acid into the skin, triggering localized

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inflammation. Yet, paradoxically, preparations derived from this very plant have long been used to soothe inflammatory conditions in joints, skin, and the respiratory tract. This duality has not escaped the attention of modern researchers who have sought to decode the molecular underpinnings of such effects.

From a nutritional standpoint, stinging nettle is nothing short of remarkable. Its leaves are rich in chlorophyll, vitamins A, C, and K, along with iron and calcium, making it a valuable dietary supplement particularly in regions where malnutrition is prevalent. Traditional healers across Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East have long used nettle leaf infusions to combat anemia, manage blood sugar, support lactation in nursing mothers, and treat diarrhea and vaginal discharge. Modern ethnobotanical surveys have confirmed many of these applications and have opened new avenues for clinical investigation.

The phytochemical richness of U. dioica has attracted considerable attention. Polyphenolic acids, flavonoids, sterols, lectins, and polysaccharides have all been isolated and characterized from various parts of the plant — leaves, roots, seeds, and stems — with each fraction demonstrating distinct biological activities. What makes this review particularly timely is the growing global interest in plant-based medicines as sustainable, low-cost alternatives to synthetic pharmaceuticals. In this context, U. dioica represents both an opportunity and an obligation: an opportunity to harness its well-documented benefits, and an obligation to address the knowledge gaps that still limit its clinical use.

II. TAXONOMIC CLASSIFICATION AND DISTRIBUTION

Urtica dioica L. occupies a well-defined position in the plant kingdom. It belongs to the kingdom Plantae, order Rosales, family Urticaceae, and genus Urtica — one of the best-known genera within this family. The species name "dioica" alludes to its dioecious nature, meaning that male and female flowers are typically borne on separate plants, though monoecious variants are also observed. There are six recognized subspecies of U. dioica, five of which possess the distinctive hollow stinging trichomes that characterize the species. The sixth subspecies — ssp. galeopsifolia — lacks these structures and is therefore non-stinging.

Geographically, the species is native to Europe, Asia, northern Africa, and western North America, though it has been introduced into many other parts of the world, often thriving as a weed in disturbed habitats, roadsides, and nitrogen-rich soils. Its cosmopolitan distribution reflects an extraordinary ecological adaptability: U. dioica can colonize environments ranging from temperate forests to semi-arid scrublands, as long as moisture and nutrient availability permit. In India, the plant is found across the Himalayan region and parts of North India, where it is known by various regional names and used extensively in folk medicine.

III. MORPHOLOGICAL AND ANATOMICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Urtica dioica is a broadleaf angiosperm that presents a rather imposing physical form. Under favorable conditions, it can grow anywhere between 50 centimeters and 3 meters in height, sending up erect, quadrangular stems that are characteristically covered with both stinging and non-stinging hairs. The stems are fibrous and have historically been used as a source of textile fiber in parts of Europe and Asia, a practice that dates back to the Bronze Age.

The leaves are arranged in an opposite decussate pattern along the stem, meaning each pair of leaves is oriented at right angles to the pair below it. Individual leaves are ovate to lanceolate in shape, ranging from 5 to 15 centimeters in length and up to 24 centimeters in width, with a shallowly cordate base and an acuminate apex. The leaf margins are coarsely serrated, and both surfaces — particularly the abaxial (underside) — are densely covered with stinging trichomes. Two linear stipules arise from each leaf axil at the base of the petiole, which itself ranges from 1 to 11 centimeters in length.

Anatomically, the structural responses of U. dioica to environmental stressors have been well documented. Studies conducted on nettle populations growing near stone quarries — where dust pollution is significant — revealed a reduction in the size of epidermal cells alongside an increase in stomatal number and size. This stomatal plasticity appears to be a compensatory mechanism: by increasing the density and size of stomata, the plant attempts to maintain adequate gas exchange despite surface deposits of particulate matter blocking leaf pores. Similar adaptations have been

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noted in other species such as Rubus plicatus, suggesting that stomatal modulation may be a broadly conserved stress-response strategy among herbaceous plants.

Figure 1: Urtica dioica L. (Stinging Nettle) growing in natural habitat, showing characteristic leaf arrangement and stem morphology.

The trichomes of U. dioica merit particular attention from a biological standpoint. These epidermal outgrowths function as a sophisticated chemical delivery system. The tip of each trichome is capped with a silica-hardened sphere that fractures upon the slightest contact, leaving a sharp, needle-like point capable of penetrating skin. The hollow base of the trichome then acts as a reservoir from which chemical irritants — including histamine, serotonin, formic acid, and acetylcholine — are injected under pressure. This mechanism serves as an effective herbivore deterrent and represents an elegant example of plant-animal chemical warfare.

IV. PHYTOCHEMICAL COMPOSITION

The therapeutic versatility of U. dioica is fundamentally rooted in its diverse phytochemical makeup. Across the various plant parts — leaves, roots, seeds, and stems — researchers have identified and quantified an impressive array of bioactive constituents, each contributing to one or more of the plant's documented pharmacological effects.

The leaves are among the most studied plant parts and have been found to contain polyphenols (including caffeic acid, chlorogenic acid, and rutin), flavonoids (quercetin, kaempferol, and isorhamnetin glycosides), alkaloids, saponins, tannins, steroids, terpenes, and cardiac glycosides. Among these, the polyphenolic acids are particularly noteworthy: their concentrations are significantly higher in male plants compared to female plants and tend to peak during the full blooming stage. This sex- and phenology-dependent variation has important implications for the standardization of nettle-based herbal products.

The roots of U. dioica have a somewhat different phytochemical profile, being particularly rich in lectins — notably Urtica dioica agglutinin (UDA) — as well as polysaccharides, sterols such as beta-sitosterol, and fatty acids. These root-specific compounds are primarily responsible for the plant's activity in managing benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH). Lectins from the root interact with sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG), reducing the proportion of free testosterone and thereby helping to alleviate the hormonal imbalance that drives prostate enlargement. Sterols in the root extract additionally interfere with the aromatase enzyme, further modulating estrogenic activity in prostate tissue.

Seeds of U. dioica have received comparatively less research attention but are known to contain significant quantities of fatty acids including linoleic acid and alpha-linolenic acid, as well as vitamin E and carotenoids. These nutritional compounds lend the seeds potential as a functional food ingredient. The overall chemical complexity of U. dioica —

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spanning lipid-soluble and water-soluble fractions — demands sophisticated extraction approaches if the full therapeutic potential of any given plant part is to be realized.

V. ANTIMICROBIAL ACTIVITY

One of the best-characterized biological activities of U. dioica is its capacity to inhibit microbial growth across a broad spectrum of pathogenic organisms. Various solvent extracts prepared from leaves, stems, and roots have demonstrated activity against both Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria, as well as against certain fungi.

Among the bacterial pathogens tested, Staphylococcus aureus — including methicillin-resistant strains (MRSA) — has proven particularly susceptible to methanolic leaf extracts of U. dioica. This is clinically significant given the global burden of MRSA infections and the dwindling arsenal of effective antibiotics. Pressurized liquid extracts of the plant have further demonstrated activity against Pseudomonas fragi, Campylobacter jejuni, and various Shewanella strains — organisms that are frequently implicated in food spoilage and gastrointestinal disease. Additionally, aqueous and ethanolic extracts have been shown to inhibit the growth of Escherichia coli, Salmonella spp., Proteus spp., Bacillus subtilis, and Pseudomonas aeruginosa.

The mechanisms underlying these antimicrobial effects appear to be multifactorial. Nettle phytochemicals interfere with the stabilization of bacterial cell membranes, obstruct bacterial adhesion to host tissues, and inactivate enzymes and receptors critical to bacterial metabolism. Flavonoids and triterpenoids isolated from crude nettle extracts have been identified through LC-MS analysis as major contributors to antimicrobial action, with compounds such as dodemorph and phthalic anhydride derivatives playing key roles. This multi-target approach is advantageous from a resistance-management perspective, as pathogens find it considerably harder to evolve resistance against multiple simultaneous mechanisms of action.

VI. ANTI-INFLAMMATORY AND CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

The anti-inflammatory properties of U. dioica have been the subject of extensive investigation, both in vitro and through clinical trials. Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain the plant's ability to reduce inflammation: inhibition of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-alpha and interleukins, suppression of cyclooxygenase (COX) and lipoxygenase (LOX) pathways, and modulation of nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB) — a master regulator of inflammatory gene expression. These mechanisms align well with the plant's longstanding use in traditional medicine for conditions such as arthritis, muscle pain, and skin inflammation.

Figure 2: Close-up view of Urtica dioica showing inflorescence and trichome-covered leaves characteristic of the species.

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Clinical applications of U. dioica extend across several therapeutic domains. In the management of allergic rhinitis, a double-blind clinical trial involving 74 patients demonstrated that treatment with 150 mg of stinging nettle extract over one month significantly reduced mean nasal smear eosinophil counts — a key marker of allergic inflammation — compared to placebo. Both treatment and control groups reported symptomatic improvement according to the sino-nasal outcome test, but the nettle-treated group achieved this with the added benefit of measurable reduction in eosinophilic activity. These findings suggest that U. dioica could serve as a supportive, well-tolerated adjunct therapy for allergic rhinitis.

The antidiabetic potential of U. dioica has also attracted growing clinical interest. Leaf extracts of the plant have been shown to significantly reduce fasting blood glucose, 2-hour postprandial glucose, and glycosylated hemoglobin (HbA1c) levels in patients with type 2 diabetes. The proposed mechanisms include inhibition of alpha-glucosidase (thereby slowing carbohydrate digestion), stimulation of insulin secretion from pancreatic beta cells, and peripheral improvement of glucose uptake. Collectively, these actions mirror the multi-pronged approach employed by several antidiabetic pharmaceuticals, suggesting that nettle could complement conventional diabetes management strategies.

In the realm of urology, U. dioica root extracts have been widely studied for their efficacy in benign prostatic hyperplasia. Clinical trials have demonstrated improvements in urinary flow rate, reduction in residual urine volume, and relief from lower urinary tract symptoms following sustained nettle root supplementation. These benefits are thought to arise from the combined effects of sex hormone modulation, anti-proliferative action on prostate cells, and anti-inflammatory activity within the gland.

VII. IMMUNOMODULATORY AND ANTIOXIDANT PROPERTIES

The aqueous leaf extract of U. dioica has demonstrated a notable capacity to stimulate immune function. Specifically, it promotes the differentiation of T lymphocytes into both CD4+ helper cells and CD8+ cytotoxic cells, thereby enhancing cell-mediated immunity. This immunostimulatory activity is of particular relevance in individuals with compromised immune function due to malnutrition, as nettle extract has also been shown to help counteract anemia and leucopenia — two common consequences of severe nutritional deficiency. The iron-rich nature of nettle leaves likely contributes to its anti-anemic effects, providing a substrate for hemoglobin synthesis that complements its immunological actions.

Antioxidant activity is another well-documented attribute of U. dioica, attributable primarily to its polyphenol and flavonoid content. However, it is important to note that environmental conditions significantly influence antioxidant capacity. Research conducted on nettle plants growing near stone quarries found that dust pollution significantly reduced the plant's antioxidant capacity rather than triggering the expected upregulation of antioxidant defenses. This counterintuitive finding — where plants under oxidative stress from pollution paradoxically showed lower antioxidant reserves — highlights the nuanced relationship between environmental quality and phytochemical expression, with direct implications for the sourcing of nettle for medicinal use.

VIII. CULTIVATION PRACTICES AND AGRICULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite its considerable medicinal value, the commercial cultivation of Urtica dioica remains underdeveloped in many parts of the world. The plant's aggressive spreading habit and stinging nature have historically discouraged farmers from cultivating it deliberately. In agricultural settings, U. dioica is more commonly encountered as a weed — and an expensive one at that — requiring regular weeding and, in some cases, herbicide application to control its spread. This increases the cost of production in fields where it appears uninvited and contributes to a somewhat negative perception of the plant among farming communities.

When cultivated deliberately, stinging nettle thrives in moist, nitrogen-rich soils with good drainage. It prefers partial shade to full sunlight and grows best at altitudes between 200 and 1500 meters. Propagation can be achieved through seed or vegetative division of rhizomes. Given that polyphenolic acid content — one of the key markers of medicinal

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quality — peaks during full bloom and is higher in male plants, targeted selection and cultivation of male plants harvested at the appropriate phenological stage could significantly improve product quality and consistency.

Ethnobotanical records from Kenya offer interesting glimpses into the broader utilitarian uses of U. dioica in agricultural communities. During drought periods, water derived from boiling nettle leaves and roots is reportedly administered to calving cows that lack the strength to stand, serving as an improvised mineral supplement rich in calcium. Locally, laying hens are fed dried nettle powder to improve the color and marketability of egg yolks. These applications speak to the plant's versatile utility beyond human medicine and suggest opportunities for integration into sustainable livestock management practices.

IX. TRADITIONAL AND ETHNOMEDICINAL USES

The ethnomedicinal heritage of Urtica dioica is as geographically diverse as the plant itself. In Balkan traditional medicine, herbal infusions prepared from nettle leaves were routinely prescribed for diarrhea, vaginal discharge, and both internal and external bleeding. Iranian healers historically called the plant "Gazaneh" — meaning "stinging" — and valued it for its diuretic and anti-rheumatic properties. Native American communities referred to it by local names and employed it as a treatment for urinary complaints and skin disorders. In France, where it is called "Grande ortie," nettle tea has been a household remedy for centuries, consumed to purify the blood and support kidney function.

Across South Asia, including parts of India and Nepal, U. dioica has been used in Ayurvedic and folk traditions for managing joint pain, skin diseases, and nutritional deficiencies. The plant is documented in several reference works on Himalayan medicinal plants as a remedy for conditions ranging from rheumatism to hair loss. In contemporary practice, nettle extract appears as a common ingredient in commercial shampoos and hair growth formulations, a nod to its traditional reputation for promoting scalp health and stimulating hair follicles.

Perhaps most fascinatingly, a practice known as "urtication" — the deliberate application of fresh nettle leaves to painful joints — has been reported across multiple cultural traditions as a remedy for arthritis. Randomized controlled trials in the United Kingdom have since validated this approach, demonstrating that urtication at the base of the thumb provides measurable pain relief in patients with osteoarthritis, likely through counter-irritant mechanisms and histamine-mediated analgesic pathways.

X. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While the evidence base supporting the medicinal use of U. dioica is substantial and growing, several challenges continue to constrain its fuller integration into evidence-based clinical practice. Chief among these is the issue of standardization. The phytochemical profile of nettle preparations varies considerably depending on plant sex, geographic origin, harvest timing, post-harvest processing, and extraction methodology. Poor processing practices by local vendors — a concern specifically noted in ethnobotanical surveys from Kenya — can substantially reduce the quality and efficacy of commercial nettle products. Without standardized quality benchmarks tied to well-characterized biomarkers, dosing precision in clinical settings remains difficult.

At the genetic level, investigations into U. dioica have employed limited molecular tools. Studies using only eight RAPD primers, for instance, have revealed appreciable genetic variation within the species, yet this sample is acknowledged to be insufficient for comprehensive characterization. Given the plant's remarkable therapeutic potential — particularly its putative role in prostate cancer management — there is a compelling case for more advanced molecular analyses, including whole-genome sequencing and transcriptomic studies under different environmental and physiological conditions. Such research could identify chemotype-specific molecular markers that facilitate the breeding of high-value medicinal cultivars.

Environmental sustainability is another consideration. The wild-harvesting of U. dioica, which remains the primary sourcing method in many regions, is difficult to control and may not guarantee consistent quality. Systematic cultivation programs, ideally guided by pharmacognostic quality standards, are needed to ensure a reliable, high-quality supply of raw material for the herbal medicine industry. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns — particularly in

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communities where U. dioica is treated purely as an invasive weed — could help reposition the plant as a valuable natural resource worthy of deliberate cultivation and conservation.

XI. CONCLUSIONS

Urtica dioica L. is far more than a common weed with an unpleasant sting. Across centuries and continents, it has earned a respected place in human medicine, nutrition, and agriculture — a standing that modern scientific research has done much to validate and elaborate. This review has synthesized evidence spanning the plant's morphological identity, its rich chemical repertoire, its cultivation requirements, and its broad spectrum of biological activities, painting a picture of a plant with genuine and multifaceted therapeutic worth.

The antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antidiabetic, immunomodulatory, and antioxidant properties of U. dioica are not merely laboratory curiosities — they are grounded in clinical observations that echo traditional knowledge accumulated over generations. The challenges ahead, though real, are tractable: improved cultivation practices, rigorous standardization of extracts, deeper molecular characterization, and expanded clinical trials would collectively move stinging nettle from the periphery of herbal medicine toward a more central role in evidence-based integrative therapeutics.

For health professionals, pharmacologists, and pharmaceutical scientists, U. dioica represents a living library of bioactive molecules waiting to be more fully understood and responsibly harnessed. As interest in plant-based medicine continues to grow — driven by concerns over synthetic drug side effects, rising healthcare costs, and renewed appreciation for traditional knowledge — stinging nettle stands ready to offer meaningful contributions to human health.

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