

Urtica australis

COMMON NAME

southern nettle, onga (Chatham I. only)

SYNONYMS

Urtica aucklandica Hook.f.

FAMILY

Urticaceae

AUTHORITY

Urtica australis Hook.f.

FLORA CATEGORY

Vascular – Native

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

NVS CODE

URTAUS

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

$2n = 24$

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2017 | Not Threatened

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2012 | Not Threatened

2009 | Not Threatened

2004 | Not Threatened

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic to the South western Fiordland Coast, Stewart, Chatham and other main subantarctic islands.

HABITAT

Abundant in coastal scrub and forest, favouring open ground, such as forest margins, open ground amongst scrub and grasses, and also cobble beaches and sand dunes. Common in damaged forest on the main Chatham Island.



South East Island (Rangatira), Chatham Islands.
Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken:
05/02/1985, Licence: CC BY.



Urtica australis. Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Stout semi-deciduous shrub forming dense bushes up to 1 x 1 m. Branches semi-erect to erect, rooting at base up to 1 x 0.1 m, somewhat woody at base, semi-succulent. Young branchlets, petioles and inflorescence axes sparsely to densely clad in stinging hairs, these sometimes completely absent from stems. Interpetiolar stipules lanceolate, usually bifid, 20 mm long. Petioles up to 50 mm long, stout, somewhat fleshy, often with a pair of lateral leaflets developed near petiole base. Leaves dark green, 100-150 x 80-140 mm, broadly ovate-cordate to suborbicular, acute to obtuse, coarsely dentate-serrate to subentire (rarely entire), teeth up to 10 mm long, stinging hairs confined to leaf margins and veins on leaf underside, often sparse or absent. Male inflorescence of 1-3 branched spikes up to 70 mm long; female inflorescence similar, flowers densely arranged, perianth in both sexes glabrate. Achenes (Seeds), pale brown, elliptic 1.5-2 mm.

SIMILAR TAXA

Easily distinguished from all other indigenous and naturalised nettles by the broadly ovate, dark green leaves, 100-200 mm long, and stout shrubby semi-deciduous habit. It could perhaps be confused with the naturalised *U. dioica* but that species is distinctly long rhizomatous and has so far not been recorded from within the known range of *U. australis*. In New Zealand at least, both species can be easily distinguished by their chromosome number $2n = 24$ in *U. australis* and $2n = 48$ in *U. dioica*.

FLOWERING

December - January

FRUITING

December - March

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Easy from fresh seed or by the division of root pieces. Dislikes drought and/or high humidity. Plants in these conditions are prone to sudden collapse. Because of the painful stings it is rarely grown. It is an ideal host plant for the red admiral butterfly (this species is the only known host plant for the endemic Chatham Island red admiral).

THREATS

Not Threatened Uncommon on Stewart Island. A cursed weed on the Chatham Islands. Relishes disturbance and is virtually untouched by large browsing animals.

ETYMOLOGY

urtica: From the Latin verb *urere* which means "to burn"

australis: Southern

WHERE TO BUY

Not commercially available.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared by P.J. de Lange for NZPCN (1 June 2013)

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

Please cite as: de Lange, P.J. (Year at time of access): *Urtica australis* Fact Sheet (content continuously updated). New Zealand Plant Conservation Network. <https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/urtica-australis/> (Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/urtica-australis/>