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Himalayan Nettle and Its Sustainable Textile Fibre

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Himalayan Nettle and Its Sustainable Textile Fibre

Himalayan nettle is a stinging plant with a useful stem fibre. Hill communities turn it into yarn and cloth. **UPSC 2019 asked what sustainable resource it gives: textile fibre.**



Himalayan nettle (Girardinia diversifolia), the source plant for allo fibre. Photo: Dinesh Valke, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

At a Glance

Four facts to hold on to.

01
Plant

Girardinia diversifolia, family Urticaceae.

02
Fibre

Bast fibre called allo in Nepal.

03
Use

Textile fibre.

04
Caution

Local work is not automatically “green”.

Bast fibre Long fibre from the outer part of a stem.
RettingUsing water and microbes to loosen fibre from bark.
CompositeTwo materials joined to gain useful properties.
AlloNepali name for the nettle fibre.

The Plant and the Fibre

Must Know

What is Himalayan nettle?

- It is *Girardinia diversifolia*, in the nettle family (Urticaceae).

- Stinging hairs on its leaves and stems can hurt bare skin.
- Its stem has a long **bast fibre**. People strip the bark to reach it.
- In Nepal the plant and fibre are often called **allo**.
- People weave the yarn into cloth, bags and other goods.
- UPSC asked for the main sustainable use: textile fibre.
- That does not mean every nettle product has a low environmental cost.
- Sources: ICIMOD and NIHE fibre manual and Punjab Agricultural University study.

> **Quick check 1.** Himalayan nettle's stem fibre is known as "allo" in Nepal. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

From Hill Plant to Cloth

Good to Know

Where does it grow?

- It grows in parts of the Himalayan region, including northern India and Nepal.
- Its range depends on moisture, slope and land use.
- Some studies report it from Uttarakhand to Sikkim.
- Do not use one altitude figure for every hillside.
- People often collect wild stems. Harvesters must leave enough plants to regrow.

How is fibre made?

1. Cut mature stems.

2. Strip the bark.
3. Soften and wash it.
4. Beat and separate the fibre.
5. Spin yarn.
6. Weave cloth.

- **Retting** lets water and microbes loosen fibre from bark. Some methods boil the bark with an alkaline mix instead.
- A 2017 survey studied sixteen nettle units in Chamoli and Uttarkashi.
- It found several steps still needed hands-on work.
- It reported about 300 grams of yarn per kilogram of bark in its process. This is one study, not a promise for every workshop.
- Sources: Uttarakhand field survey and NIHE–ICIMOD manual.

> **Quick check 2.** Nettle fibre must be cleaned and spun before it can become cloth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Edge

Previous Year Questions

UPSC 2019 asked what Himalayan nettle is a sustainable source of.

> **Quick check 3.** UPSC 2019 identified Himalayan nettle mainly as a source of an anti-malarial drug. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quality, Work and Real Limits

Great to Know

What can the fibre do?

- Studies find nettle can make strong, long fibres.
- Some tested samples did well against flax samples.
- Results change with plant source and processing.
- It is unsafe to say every nettle fibre beats every flax fibre.
- Researchers also test nettle in composites.
- Comfort, colour and yarn quality matter too.
- Sources: Indian Journal of Fibre and Textile Research, 2025 (bot-blocked) and published fibre comparison.

Who earns from nettle work?

- The 2017 survey found nettle processing and spinning units in Chamoli and Uttarkashi.
- This applies to those units, not every Himalayan village.
- In Sikkim, NIHE's work with local groups aimed to improve fibre skills and incomes.

- In Nepal, an ICIMOD project trained women's groups and improved processing tools.
- Panchachuli Women Weavers in Kumaon lists nettle among fibres used at Binsar. Not all its workers make nettle goods.
- Sources: ICIMOD Nepal case and Panchachuli Women Weavers.

When is it truly sustainable?

- Wild plants may regrow, and local fibre work may bring income.
- Neither fact makes cloth automatically "green".
- Bark boiling can use fuel and water.
- Chemical treatments can pollute water if waste is mishandled.
- ICIMOD's cleaner processing in Nepal used less fuelwood in that project.
- Ask: how was it harvested, cleaned, paid for, and how long will the cloth last?

Think it through: why can local nettle work help without being automatically green?

Harvesting, spinning and weaving can bring local income. Yet boiling may use fuel and water. Workers also need fair pay and skin protection. Check the whole process before judging its impact.

Quick check 4. Panchachuli Women Weavers in Kumaon uses nettle fibre in some products. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 5. Some tested Himalayan nettle fibres showed high strength and length compared with tested flax samples. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. Himalayan nettle has stinging hairs, so harvesters need skin protection. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick Q&A

Plant name?

Girardinia diversifolia.

Fibre type?

Bast fibre.

Nepali name?

Allo.

Plant family?

Urticaceae.

UPSC 2019 answer?

Textile fibre.

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1. Recently, there was a growing awareness in our country about the importance of Himalayan nettle (Girardinia diversifolia) because it is found to be a sustainable source of (UPSC CSP 2019)

A. pulp for paper industry

B. biodiesel

C. textile fibre

D. anti-malarial drug

See answer ↓

2. The stem fibre of Himalayan nettle (Girardinia diversifolia), traditionally spun into cloth, is locally known by which name in Nepal?

A. Jute

B. Allo

C. Ramie

D. Kapok

See answer ↓

3. Girardinia diversifolia, the Himalayan giant nettle valued for its textile fibre, belongs to which plant family?

A. Linaceae

B. Moraceae

C. Urticaceae

D. Malvaceae

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The correct answer is textile fibre. Himalayan nettle's stem yields a strong bast fibre, called allo in Nepal, that is hand-spun into cloth. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The correct answer is Allo. Himalayan nettle's bast fibre is called allo across much of Nepal, where it has long been hand-spun into cloth. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The correct answer is Urticaceae, the nettle family. Its stinging leaves are typical of this family, while its stem yields the strong fibre used for cloth. ↑ Q3

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **True.** ↑ 4
5. **True.** ↑ 5
6. **True.** ↑ 6

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