

# HIGH ECONOMIC AND COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL OF HIMALAYAN GIANT NETTLE

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Even if in Nepal there is not a national policy for promoting nettle fabrics yet, various universities, research centres, organizations and cooperatives are making efforts to encourage production of nettle threads and fabrics taking into consideration the huge economic and commercial potentials of these products.

The Studies [\*Traditional knowledge of processing and use of the Himalayan giant nettle\*](#) published by the [\*Ethno Botany Journal\*](#) and by the [\*Katmandu University Journal of Science and Technology\*](#) present interesting information on traditional production processes (the photographs published in this article have been taken from these studies).

Nettle could be an important source of income for people in poor mountain communities since the raw materials are found in most parts of Nepal. Himalayan giant nettle is found in 52 of the 75 districts of Nepal.

Stinging nettle is a plant that grows from 1.5 to 3 meters in height with perennial root stock. The plant bears both the male and female flowers in the same stalk. It grows wild under forest canopies between the altitudes of 1500 to 3000 m. The plant is sturdy and grows well even in difficult environments. Different varieties grow together in the same shrub and it is common to find many shades of the natural color in the threads from adjacent plants. The Himalayan nettle plants hold soil in place and help prevent landslides and erosion.

The plant is locally known as Himalayan giant nettle and grows up on the rugged mountain terrain of the Himalayas in Nepal. It is a perennial plant from which a sought about fiber is extracted and processed by native Nepalese since time immemorial. The extracted fiber, locally known as *allo*, is claimed to have properties and quality better than those of cotton as the former absorbs moisture and water four times than cotton. Besides it has been known to have excellent properties that insulate the skin against high and low temperatures. Tough fiber is *allo* but after continued washing it becomes soft and gentle on the skin.

Demand for *allo* apparel is on the rise as more and more foreigners find the uniqueness of the fiber being soothing to hypersensitive skin. Also, nettle plant grows well even under difficult natural conditions and pesticides and fertilisers do not have to be used to keep the plant alive as is mostly done with cotton. Unlike many other fibers, the nettle plant regenerates from the leftover stems year after year. Producers says that *allo* production could be an important source of income for many impoverished families in Nepal.



Sankhuwasabha, a remote hilly district in Nepal, is at the forefront of allo production, followed by Pyuthan, Parbat, Soluknumbu, Myagi, Achham, Bajhang and Bajura. Allo has been processed in these areas since time immemorial as allo is required for every cultural and religious function of the local inhabitants who hail mainly from Rai, Gurung and Magar communities. Allo cloth is prepared from the fiber extracted from nettle plants that proliferate naturally at the Himalayan forests. Allo processing requires intensive labor. The most difficult part is involved in making the allo thread. In the absence of new technology or machine to process barks and stalk of the nettle plant, the local people depend on manual labor to make the thread and weave it into fabrics.

In the districts of the mountain region of Nepal only women are involved in allo thread and fabric production. They are also expert in weaving and knitting allo thread into various novelty products as well as wearables. Every household in these communities is involved in allo production. The work is extremely time-consuming, hence production is slow. Allo thread making requires such tedious work that an individual cannot make more than 200-400 grams of thread in a day.

Allo plants are harvested once a year from the forests. Smaller products made from allo fiber have been introduced in the market as novelty items and light wearables (shawls, caps etc.). Producers have been exporting the fabric and finished products to India, Japan and Sri Lanka. Many enterprises like [Natural Fiber of Nepal](#), [SABAH Nepal](#), [Himalayan Wild Fibers](#) or [Barkha](#) gather the yarn produced by the small producers and market it internationally through societies as [Swicofil](#), whose website offers interesting information about the processing techniques.

To improve the value of such an important Nepalese resource; to obtain high impact on local development and, in particular, to bring up the value of women's work, it is necessary to strengthen all aspects of the production chain; to promote nettle cultivation on private and common land; to increase the annual yield by activating common services for the mechanization of carding and spinning processes so as to produce yarns ready to be used and keep this way the added value in the communities of manufacturers and activate services or marketing cooperatives so as to enable producers getting higher income.

The whole process can be realized with technologies reachable by small and medium enterprises, or cooperatives. Local production chains could also include other nettle potentials as the maceration water, the leaves and the waste products can be utilized as a natural organic pesticide and Nettles may also be used as a dye-stuff, producing yellow from the roots, or yellowish green from the leaves. More research as well as more training are needed to spread awareness about the harvesting methods and processing of the allo. This is a sector with significant production potential and it might have a great economic and social impact.

#### **To know more and establish collaboration**

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