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Wicked Weeds - Purple Deadnettle & Henbit

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Few wild plants are hardy enough to emerge in April. The ground has only recently thawed, and most are waiting for just the right amount of consistent warmth and moisture before coming up. But not purple deadnettle and henbit! They take advantage of the open expanses of soil and lack of competition. These common weedy plants are members of the mint family and form early groundcover mats, with delicate purple-pink flowers, a lovely addition to a spring weed bouquet.

- **Purple Deadnettle** *Lamium purpureum* L. Also known as: red deadnettle, or red henbit.
- **Henbit** *Lamium amplexicaule* L. Also known as: deadnettle, hen's bite, henbit deadnettle, henbit nettle.

You can see that these two jokers love confusing people. Like a pair of mischievous twins, they're often mistaken for one another. They are both members of the mint (*Lamiaceae*) family.

Purple deadnettle can reach heights of 16-18 inches. Leaves are opposite, triangular to heart-shaped, sparsely hairy and have coarse rounded teeth at the margins and may be up to 1 inch long. Upper leaves are more purplish red in color than the lower leaves, which tend to be deep green. Leaves become smaller as you go up the plant. Purple to pinkish-purple flowers occur in whorls in the upper leaf axils.

Henbit is an herbaceous winter annual commonly found throughout the temperate regions of the world. It is native to Eurasia and can grow to heights of 15 inches. Leaves are green, opposite, circular to heart shaped and have rounded teeth at the margins. Flowers are reddish-purple and attached in the upper leaf axils. Henbit has the classic hooded, five-lobed, long-tubed flowers of the mint family. An old common name for this plant is “Archangels” which refers to the

clusters of small, hooded flowers that rise up like a choir of robed figures.

You may see these plants on the edges of an empty lot, taking over mulched tree pits, or in my back yard. I have always just yanked these right out, but now I know that they are an important early food source for hungry pollinators, especially honeybees, they also self-pollinate, ensuring their reproduction regardless of whether they have bee visitors. So, rather than yank these shallow rooted and easy to pull early pioneers, I will let them be and enjoy a few weeks of their purples and greens. When the weather heats up, both will yellow and wither – then I will yank them out.

I usually like to mention culinary and medicinal uses if applicable, and these definitely are. All aboveground parts of both plants are edible raw or cooked. The best-tasting bits are the blossoms. Chop them up and throw them in a stir-fry or on top of your salad. Delicious! Medicinally, deadnettle has strong anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, which is why it is traditionally used as an arthritis herb. It can also be used to stop external bleeding and has the ability to ease allergy symptoms. (Be advised this does not constitute medical advice).

References:

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