

*Zizania aquatica*

[Synonyms : *Ceratocheate aquatica*, *Hydropyrum esculentum*, *Stipa angulata*, *Zizania aquatica* var. *subbrevis*, *Zizania aquatica* var. *clavulosa*, *Zizania aquatica* var. *effusa*, *Zizania palustris*]

**WILD RICE** is an annual aquatic grass. Native to North America it has small yellow to reddish-brown flower spikes.

It is also known as Annual wild rice, Canada rice, Canadian wild rice, Duck rice, Indian rice, *Indianris* (Swedish), *Kaw-sun* (Chinese), Manchurian water rice, *Psi* (Dakota North American Indian), *Si* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Siwaninda* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Tuscarora rice, Water oat, Water rice, and *Wildreis* (German).

One of the features of most wild grain is that as soon as the fruit (seeds) mature the ear containing them shatters to distribute the seeds rapidly into the surrounding soil. Within a week a crop can have dispersed particularly if the area experiences sudden hot weather.

*Aquatica* means ‘growing in or near water’.

Wild rice which is really an aquatic oat was one of the traditional staple foods of local North American Indians particularly in areas unsuitable for maize (*Zea*). The Menominee tribe especially (whose tribal name was derived from their name for this plant) depended upon wild rice as their primary food – and it was also a staple part of the Ponca, Dakota, Winnebago and Omaha diet as well.

The seeds were gathered in the area of the Great Lakes (now primarily in Canada) for instance long before the development of recognised agricultural practices anywhere in the World. Canoes were paddled in amongst the plants when the seed was just ripe. The grain was either beaten off the stalks with a curved strap straight into the North American Indian boats, or whole sheaves of the grass were bound, cut and carried to dry land. The seeds were then winnowed or roasted before being ground for flour – and the flour was usually made into soup, gruel or flat cakes – and unground seeds were cooked in pilaffs.

The importance of this food to the North American Indian tribes is illustrated not only by their history which includes tribal disagreements over possession of suitable wild rice land, but also in some of today’s place names in North America especially along the central Canadian and United States border. Many of these names commemorate the different tribal names for the grain. Perhaps a far more striking point, highlighted by some authorities, is that wild rice anchored some of the tribes. It was prized beyond maize (*Zea*) and a nomadic life would have taken the tribe away from the areas where it grew. Still today the majority of the Canadian wild rice crop is on or near the Chippewa White Earth Reservation and is harvested by the Indians there. They used it to make a variety of foods as already indicated, and these also included bread and stuffing. (One reported delicacy however that was once held in high regard would be unappetizing to many a modern western palate. An alleged ingredient combined with the seeds was said to be rabbit excrement.) In the past it was also eaten by the Meskwaki and Thompson Indian tribes. Wild rice became a cash crop for several Indian tribes including the Thompson and some of the Chippewa.

It was only towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that serious attempts to cultivate the species have proved successful, notably in the United States (in northern California and in Minnesota). Plants were found that shattered less easily on maturity and these are grown in flooded fields that are drained for the harvest. Nevertheless it can still be gathered from the wild too by more traditional methods to meet growing modern demand.

Wild rice is also grown by sportsmen as wild fowl food.

In China the solid base of the stem, not the seeds, is the part that is eaten.