

*Remember...be respectful of the plant ... Let's all be manoomin stewards!*



### Where can I get more information?

**Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission,**  
PO Box 9, 72682 Maple St., Odanah, WI 54861; (715) 682-6619 [www.glifwc.org](http://www.glifwc.org)

**Wisconsin DNR,**  
101 South Webster Street, Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707; (888) 936-7463 [www.dnr.state.wi.us](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us)

**Minnesota DNR,**  
500 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, MN 55155; (888) 646-6367 [www.dnr.state.mn.us](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us)

*Wild Rice and the Ojibway People,*  
Thomas Vennum, Jr., Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988

*Wild Rice in Canada,* S.G. Aiken et al., NC Press Limited, Toronto, 1988



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# HARVESTING WILD RICE In A Good Way

## AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO HARVESTING WILD RICE



**A**re you interested in harvesting wild foods and eating healthy, organic grains? Do you enjoy the beauty and tranquility of shallow lakes and slow moving rivers?

If so, you might be interested in gathering your own wild rice. This introductory guide can help you get started.

### Just what is wild rice?

Botanically, wild rice, or manoomin as called by the Ojibwe, is an annual aquatic grass which grows in shallow lakes, wetlands, and streams, reaching its greatest abundance in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. Wild rice grows best in areas with gently flowing water and mucky substrates. Seeds of the plant are coveted by wildlife and humans for their wonderful flavor and high nutritional content.



Historically, wild rice has been a central component of Native American culture in the western Great Lakes region. It was a staple food for the early European explorers and fur traders as well.

### How is it gathered?

Wild rice is gathered in much the same way it's been gathered for centuries. Generally, two people work as a team in a canoe. The "poler" stands at one end and propels the canoe slowly through the rice bed using a 15-19 foot push-pole with a forked end. Many ricers make their own push-poles out of tamarack or other similar light, straight wood. Wooden hand railings or aluminum poles can also be used. A natural wooden crotch is notched into the pole or an aluminum "duck bill" (available at sporting goods stores) is attached. Poles should be smooth, with exposed bolts taped over so they will not snag and uproot rice plants. No motors can be used while harvesting.

While the poler glides the canoe through the bed, the "knocker" gently harvests the grain using a pair of smooth, rounded wooden sticks. One stick is used to lean the rice stalks over the canoe, while the second is used



to dislodge only the ripe grain from the seed heads. Generally, the knocker works alternately from both sides of the canoe. Mature seed will drop off without

much coaxing; if you have to knock the heads hard to get the seed to dislodge, STOP, and try again in a couple of days. The seed isn't ready for harvest yet, and you will only damage the plants if you continue. Similarly, if many stems or leaves are ending up in your canoe, you are probably hitting the plants too hard. Be aware that you will be harvesting small spiders and "rice worms" (a moth larva) as well!

Most ricing sticks are hand-made. It is easy to fashion a pair with common woodworking tools. One and a quarter inch cedar works well. Select a piece of wood with a straight grain and a lack of knots, and taper the sticks from the handle to the tip.

Seating position is a matter of personal preference. Often the knocker sits near the front of the canoe but faces the poler in the back, or will sit near the middle of the canoe and faces forward. Occasionally, the poler works from the front of the canoe. Experiment!



The poler should guide the canoe in parallel rows working in an orderly manner through the rice bed.

Remember, ricing in a good way is respectful to the plant and to other harvesters. Manoomin ripens gradually, and proper harvesting protects the plants and preserves subsequent harvest opportunities.



## When is the ricing season?



Rice generally begins to ripen mid- to late-August and will continue to be harvestable for the next 3 to 5 weeks dependent on weather conditions. River rice usually ripens before lake rice and rice in different lakes will ripen at slightly different times. Scouting efforts will be necessary to check the status of rice ripening.

Check out the wealth of ricing information at GLIFWC's website. Go to [www.glifwc.org](http://www.glifwc.org) (click 'harvest regulations' then 'ricing' for regulations, maps and more).

## Is there technique involved in ricing?

Yes. But with some preparation even a novice can rice successfully if the seed is ripe. However, ricing is also an art, and harvest tends to increase with experience. Experienced ricers know when and where to pick, how to read seed maturation, how to pattern a bed, and how to coordinate the poling and the knocking. One great way to become a successful ricer is to find an experienced mentor to learn from.

## Once the rice is in the canoe, am I finished?

No. Freshly harvested or "green" rice is not ready for consumption until it's been "finished." Finishing involves parching the rice to reduce its moisture content, and removing the papery sheath that surrounds each seed. You can either finish the rice yourself or you can take it to an experienced finisher.

Traditional small batch finishing is demonstrated in the following pictures. Professional finishers typically mechanize some or all of these steps.

Finishing is another learned art, so most ricers air dry their rice then bring it to an experienced finisher who may charge a fee or may take a portion of the finished rice (typically 20%) as payment. The process and style of finishing will affect the flavor of the rice. It can be difficult to find finishers, so ask other harvesters for suggestions.

Note that your finished rice will likely be a mix of green, tan, and brown colors, unlike the uniformly black, cultivated wild rice often seen in stores.

Remember, regardless who finishes your rice, spread your green rice on a tarp to thoroughly air dry unless it will be finished immediately.

## How much will I get in a trip?



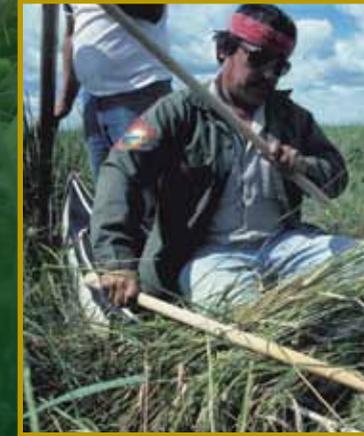
It is hard to predict. A ricer's canoe may hold little at the end of the day if the trip was made too early or too late, or if disease or storms reduced the crop. But it's also possible to harvest well over a 100 pounds

under optimal conditions. Your yield will tend to increase with your knowledge, experience, coordination, and scouting effort.

Rice loses weight as well as water during finishing. A 100 pounds of green rice will produce about 35-50 pounds of finished rice. However, rice re-absorbs water during cooking, so a cup of uncooked rice will produce 2-3 cups of cooked.

## Do I need to be careful?

Yes, do be careful! Rice seeds ripen gradually, with seeds at the top of the stalk ripening first. Gentle knocking will loosen ripe seeds without breaking stems, and preserve subsequent harvest opportunities. Rough treatment can kink or break stems, preventing further maturation from taking place, and reduce production not only for humans but for the myriad of wildlife species that depend on this plant. Again, no motors are allowed while ricing to maintain the integrity of the bed.



## Can I take to much?

When ricing is done in a respectful way only 10-15% of the seed is harvested - even with repeated visits - leaving an ample amount for wildlife and for natural reseeding of the bed.

## Do I need a license?

In most areas, a state license or tribal permit is required to harvest manoomin. Be sure to check with your state or tribe for license requirements and for other harvest regulations in your area.

## Are there other regulations?

In most areas, there are additional regulations that need to be followed. Typically they reflect traditional harvest techniques and are designed to protect the resource. Regulations may apply to the length and composition of ricing sticks, the size of the boat used, harvest hours, etc. Regulations vary from state to state, and for tribal and non-tribal members, so be sure to check with your state or tribal natural resource department for regulations that apply to you.

## Any cooking tips?

Your finished rice will have a distinguishing aroma and nutty flavor and can be used in a variety of ways. Cooking times do not vary much from white rice, just be sure to rinse your rice in cold water prior to cooking to remove any impurities. The internet is an excellent source for recipes as well as cooking directions for the stove top, oven, and microwave. Research, experiment, and enjoy!



## The Basic Steps in Traditional Wild Rice Finishing



Drying



Parching



Jigging



Winnowing