

# WILD FEAST FOR THE SUMMERTIME

## WILD GRAINS!

BY WOLFGANG ROUGLE

Many Sacramento Valley residents don't realize that just a few generations ago, wheat was a major crop here. Wheat was so important for a while that in the parched south (e.g., Yolo County), where the land receives too little reliable rainfall in a single year to nourish a wheat crop, farmers devoted *two* entire years to a single wheat crop. The first year, they would assiduously harrow the top inch of land after every rainy spell, to keep weeds from growing and using the moisture that was accumulating in the soil. In this way, about a quarter of a year's rain can be stored in the bare, fallowed soil. The wheat crop, planted in the second fall, would be harvested in the second spring, having had access to 125% of a year's rainfall.

You don't have to go to such lengths to harvest local grain. You just need a sickle, a bunch of old pillowcases, and some walking shoes.

This entire Valley was once a vast perennial grassland. Native Americans harvested the grain from wild grasses every summer much as ancient Europeans once harvested wild wheat: advancing on foot with flails and baskets.

But low-elevation perennial grassland is the most endangered kind of ecosystem in the world—far more threatened than rainforest or coral reef. It's because people keep plowing it to grow wheat. Thanks to the efforts of European settlers, nearly every open space in our Valley is now a thicket of invasive annual domesticated grasses. Yet oats, rye, and wheat all grow wild here, ripe for the threshing.

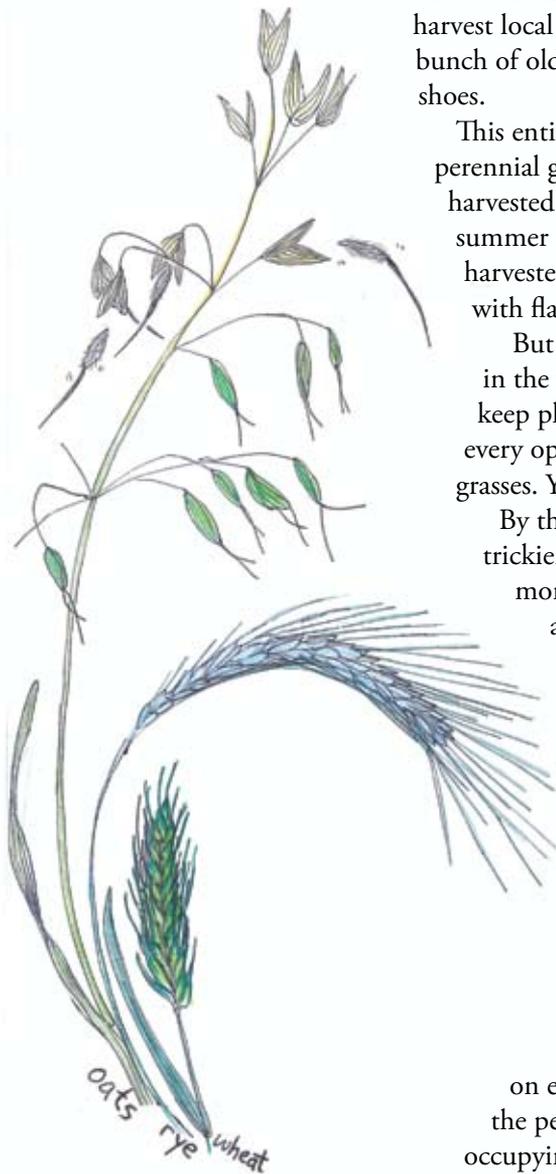
By the way, all grass seeds are edible, but nondomesticated ones are generally trickier to harvest: their seeds shatter sooner and fall to the ground, so timing is more crucial. Besides, California's remaining native grasses have enough to worry about, and they deserve to reproduce in peace. Also, some grasses have barbed awns (like foxtail, technically a barley), and these are best avoided just in case pieces of irritating barbed chaff get into your nose during threshing.

To explore the awe-inspiring world of grass, check out [Grasses in California](#), by Beecher Crampton. Three hundred species!

Like most things worth doing, grain harvesting has not changed much in the last ten thousand years. Get some grass heads. Put them in a bag, stomp on them, then toss them in the wind to let the chaff blow away from the grain. I have nothing more to say on the subject.

There are two non-grass grains worth mentioning. Both are serious weeds throughout the Valley. Both are native ancient grains of the Americas, and both have edible leaves as well.

Amaranth (a.k.a. pigweed or redroot) is one of the most nutritious grains on earth. It is said that the Spanish conquistadors, who were trying to subdue the peoples of the Andes, outlawed its cultivation—on pain of death. If your occupying army fears it, you know it has to be good. Amaranth seeds shatter (break



## SUMMERTIME GRAINS AND GREENS

To 2 cups boiling water, add two cups well-soaked lambs' quarters grain. Cover and simmer 20 minutes. Grind one cup amaranth grain and add it. (Don't worry about a little amaranth chaff: it will get softer as you cook it.) As the mixture thickens, add lambs' quarter and amaranth greens to taste. Add a little more water if necessary, and when the grains are no longer crunchy, serve with a little soy sauce and lemon juice.

free from their husks) on maturity, so you can harvest them simply by shaking a stalk of amaranth over a bowl, then blowing away the chaff and dust. The seeds are tiny black lenses and are wonderful boiled as porridge or ground into flour. They have a flavor somewhere between hazelnuts and cornmeal, and a few tablespoons will miraculously fill your belly.

Amaranth leaves are rich and meaty and don't cook down. They're edible raw but are rather coarse. They are excellent simply steamed with a little salt, and they blend in to work well in any dish.

Don't forget lambs' quarters, a relative of spinach. Lambs' quarters (*Chenopodium* spp.) are delicious steamed. They cook down rapidly, like spinach, and have a much more buttery, delectable flavor. Mexican cooks know them as *quelites*.

All varieties of lambs' quarters are covered in a dewy gauze of glandular hairs, which also cling to the inflorescence and need to be washed off. But after washing, the seeds are ready to use. The best use of lambs' quarters grain is cooked, as a substitute for quinoa (which is also a *Chenopodium*).

The domesticated annual grasses are all cool-season plants, and their grain tends to be ready by the last week of May and throughout June. Look in any unmowed field. Do your neighborhood a favor by scything the overgrown yard of that sad foreclosed home and take home a sack of grain to thresh. *Chenopodium* and *Amaranthus* are warm-season plants (in fact, many gardeners time their corn planting by simply waiting for amaranth seedlings to emerge). The plants are continuously germinating throughout our long summers, so you can find ripe heads of grain from late July until frost. Organic farms, derelict compost piles, and ditch levees are a good place to look. 🐾

*Wolfgang Rougle farms near Cottonwood and is the author of Sacramento Valley Feast, a wild food field guide and cookbook. Her wonderful book—you'll recognize the same lively tone and occasional irreverence as in these quarterly pieces—is available at Lyon Books in Chico, at the Red Bluff Art Gallery in Red Bluff, from the Twining Tree Farm stand at Redding Saturday Farmers' Market, or by sending \$12 to Wolfgang Rougle, 16395 Ridgewood Rd., Cottonwood, CA 96022.*



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