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.

Wild rice is gathered in much the same way it’s been gathered for centuries. Generally, 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.

Are 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.
Finishing is another learned art, so most ricers air dry their rice then bring it to an experienced finisher who may charge a fee to finish 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.

**Drying**: This step is important to remove excess moisture from the rice. Too much moisture can lead to spoilage.

**Parching**: This involves parching the rice to reduce its moisture content, and removing the papery sheath that surrounds each seed. It is typically done over a fire or in a special parching pan.

**Jigging**: This step is optional but can help reduce the amount of chaff and debris in your rice. It involves shaking the rice in a special container to separate the ripe seeds from the stalks and other debris.

**Winnowing**: This step removes the remaining chaff and debris from the rice. It is done by blowing air over the rice, which causes the chaff to rise and be blown away while the rice falls through.

The internet is an excellent source for recipes as well as cooking directions for the stove top, oven, and microwave. Research, experiment, and enjoy!