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## Wildflower Spot – September 2011

### John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## ANNUAL WILD RICE

*Zizania aquatica*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Often seen just offshore in marshes, Wild Rice is recognizable instantly with a large, open flower cluster, divided in two parts. The lower branches have drooping male spikelets, while on the upper branches the female spikelets (flowers) are more erect and compressed. This annual grass grows up to 10 feet high, with stout stems and large leaves, up to four feet long and two inches wide.

Wild Rice grows only in our coastal counties, in fresh and slightly brackish marshes, stream borders, and shallow waters. The plant extends from southern Quebec to the coastal states from Maine to Florida and Louisiana. Flowers appear from May into October.

Stands of Wild Rice are repeatedly harvested because the seeds do not mature simultaneously and readily shatter from the plant. Native Americans used canoes, pulling the stalks into the boat and gently beating the flower to release only the mature kernels. A famous Indian dish was tassimanonny – wild rice, corn and fish boiled together.

A staple food of the Indians, gamebirds, ducks and blackbirds, Wild Rice has been cultivated during the last 15 years and can be found in many stores. Compared with other cereals, it is high in protein and low in fat.



The genus name *Zizania* is an adaptation of *zizanium* for an ancient name of some wild grains, and *aquatica* means “growing in or near water.”

Note: Southern wild rice (*Zizaniopsis miliacea*) is a perennial plant that ranges only as far north as Virginia and Maryland. In its flower cluster the male and female spikelets both occur throughout the flower cluster. ❖

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**Photo:** Annual Wild Rice (*Zizania aquatica*) taken by Phillip Merritt  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).