
Quinoa Seed

Quinoa, (*Chenopodium quinoa*) Wild., was a staple of the ancient Incas and is still an important grain crop in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. Thanks to Bruce Flora who brought us quinoa seed from Bolivia, we are now able to offer you seed for trial. Because it flourishes at high altitudes (2500-4000 meters), we thought we might have a chance of growing it at ECHO in southern Florida during the winter season. It has exceeded our expectations so far, growing quite vigorously and already beginning to form grain. Nearly every American who sees it thinks it is lambs quarter, a common edible wild plant of the same genus in North America often used as a green. We will certainly be examining it more closely to determine whether it has potential for a much wider range of climates. Dr. Russell Seibert at the Marie Selby Gardens told me today that he thinks he has heard reports of it growing quite successfully in Alaska.

The National Academy of Sciences book Underexploited Tropical Plants with Promising Economic Value is the source for most of the remaining information that I will share about quinoa. They believe that it may prove to be a better protein source than most of the true cereals. Seeds contain 58% starch, 5% sugar, 12-19% protein and 4-5% fat. It is used in the Andes primarily as a food of campesinos and poorer classes. It is a hardy plant, growing to 1-2.5 meters tall, maturing in 5-6 months with short day length. Seeds are produced in large sorghum-like clusters. They are used in soup and ground into flour for bread and cake. They have also been used to make beer and produce feed for swine and poultry. In Peru a breakfast cereal is made from quinoa.

A drawback is that seeds of some varieties contain saponins. These impart a bitter flavor unless washed out in cold water or milled out. There are saponin-free varieties, but these are probably more susceptible to bird depredation. I do not notice a bitter taste in the raw seeds that we have.

We will send a small quantity of seed to any of you who wish to give it a try and who will promise to share your results with us. It would be a great help if a few of you who work in the region where quinoa is common would share additional information with me. If you could send seed of one or several varieties, especially low-saponin varieties, I would be delighted to reimburse you for postage. Let me know if you can send seed and I will mail you my plant import permit.