

An introduction to MANOMIN



The Name

Manomin (other spellings include manomin and minomen) is known as *Zizania aquatica* in many scientific publications. English speakers commonly call it “wild rice.” It is the only cereal grain native to what we now know as North America. The word manomin can be broken into two parts: “man,” referring to Kizhe Manito (the Great Spirit who created the grain), and “min,” meaning “good berry” or “delicacy.” For this reason, manomin is often translated from Anishinabemowin into English as “spirit berry” or “gift from the Creator.”

Geographic Distribution

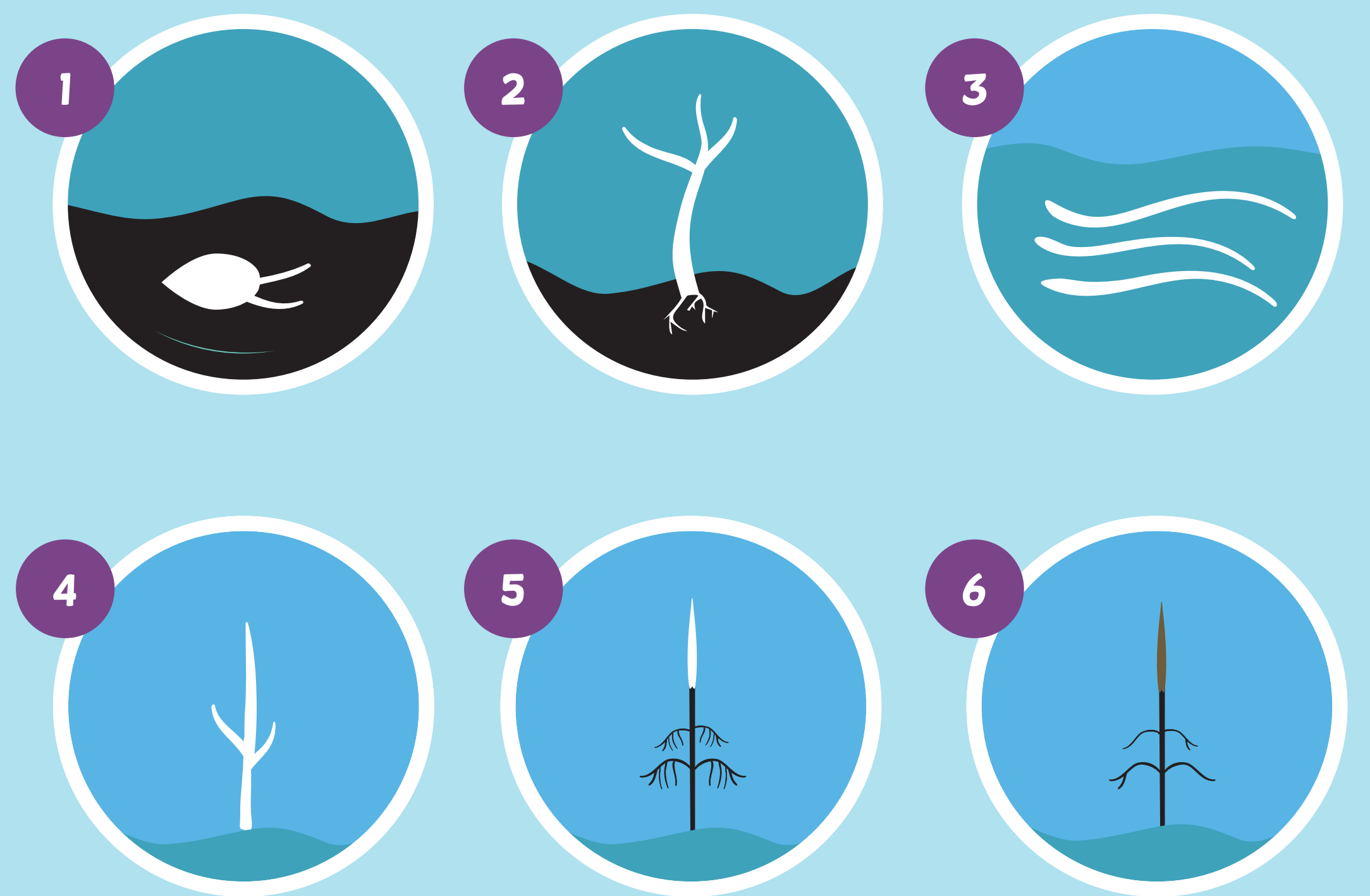
Manomin is an annual aquatic grass that grows in shallow lakes, rivers, and bays throughout eastern and north-central North America. In what we now refer to as Canada and the United States, manomin grows well in Manitoba and Ontario (CA) as well as Wisconsin and Minnesota (US). Manomin can adapt to the water in which it grows, creating regional variations in taste.

Distribution of Manomin in North America



The Life Cycle

Although the weather may cause slight variations, manomin seeds tend to germinate in mid- to late April, shortly after the ice breaks. Once the seed sprouts its first root, it becomes anchored in the mud and continues to grow towards the sun. When the seedling nears the water’s surface, it forms aerial leaves. At the start of July, the stalk begins to fully emerge from the water and develops grains. These grains will ripen gradually throughout the late summer. Manomin is typically ready to be harvested between mid-August and mid-September. Harvest is called once the grain has formed a “hard” shell and is no longer “milky.”



Harvest

The month of the harvest moon, from mid-August to mid-September, is called Manominigiis (“wild rice moon” in English), or manominikegiis (“wild rice picking moon” in English). During this moon, pickers canoe to manomin fields to gently knock the grains into their boats using cedar poles. As the grains fall towards the canoe, some will tumble into the water. In this way, traditional harvesting methods help to reseed the crop for the next season.

When the canoe becomes heavy with manomin, pickers will return to camp to process their harvest. It must be roasted, danced on, and winnowed before it can be sold or stored for home use. Not all the harvested manomin will be processed for these purposes. Many families replant a portion of the manomin gathered in their canoes. Roasted seeds cannot germinate. For this reason, “green rice” is returned to the water by families who seed fields for future seasons and generations.