

quinoa

That exotic little grain, that you've been hearing about but forget how to say.

For the adventuresome amongst us, might I suggest Quinoa, pronounced keen-wah. A new bit of haute cuisine in the Pacific Northwest, and yet a re-discovery, Quinoa was a staple of the ancient Incas, who called it "the mother grain." It remains a staple in South American cuisine, as it contains more protein than most other grains. Having a delicate flavor, it is a great alternative to rice or couscous as a side dish, and can be added to meat and vegetables as a main dish. Additionally, Quinoa is complimentary in soups, salads, breads or as a breakfast cereal.

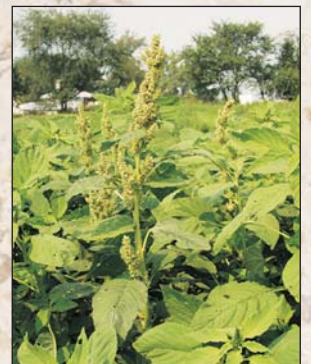
Now for the personal side of the story . . . I discovered a small box of Quinoa at Trader Joe's and feeling a little flush about offering such exotic fare at my own dinner table, I first tried a pilaf made with chicken stock and a few fresh herbs from the garden. I used our rice cooker and it couldn't have been easier or more tasty.....voila!

Shortly thereafter, while hunting around for fun and unusual seeds, I discovered a package of . . . who would have guessed my good fortune. . . Quinoa! Well, now I had something here. And would my master gardening friends ever be IMPRESSED as we toured the gardens and I casually pointed out my healthy and considerable stand of QUINOA growing over there by the sweet corn. Oh yes, now we had something of a discovery! Great potential, at the very least!

So, in the bleary, insipidly rainy days of late Spring, I fairly bounded out to my well-prepared patch of ground with my precious and rare package of Quinoa seeds. Over the ensuing weeks, I rather patiently but I must admit with some excitement watched my perfectly formed row, marked with stakes and string, because I really had no idea how a Quinoa plant looks.

Like all gardeners, I carefully pulled weeds and hovered as the tiny seeds germinated and gradually began to fill in my carefully tilled and marked row. But that's so strange! I know I've purged all weeds from the vicinity but there they are, growing in a decidedly ramrod straight fashion right where my exotic and rare Quinoa should be emerging. I waited and studied the row and grew more befuddled at each inspection. That stuff sure looks like "pigweed", thought I...I mean really identical. You know, that pointy leafed, easily pulled, invasive weed, that EVERY northwest garden has and any of us that have spent more than 5 minutes out there, have marveled at how well it grows . . . better than any carefully cultivated vegetable or flower. I mean, it grows everywhere!

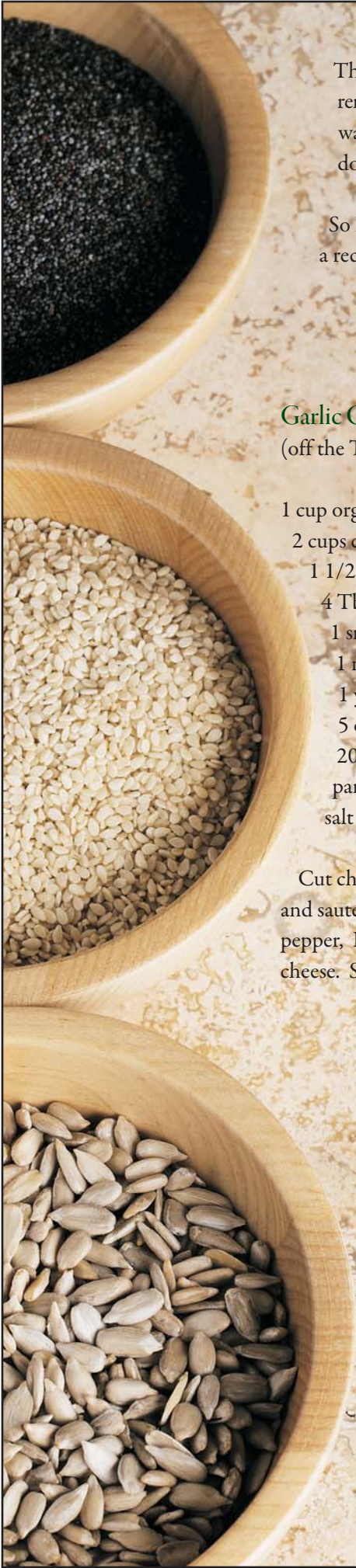
So I let it grow on. At about 6 inches tall, this "low-life-charlatan" was lustily bulking up. Disappointingly, there were absolutely no other small wonderful seedlings anywhere near that carefully planted row. More inspection and comparison (because I did have a few unwanted specimens of pigweed that I had not summarily ripped out of the ground yet. . .). Oh my gosh . . . the leaves not only have the same soft, felty feel but they taste the same. And that familiar, might I say, grain-like seed head emerging . . .



Pigweed Plant



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The truth, the revelation of it all . . . I had gone out to a fairly expensive garden center (which will remain unnamed to protect their reputation!), put down good money, and actually planted, cultivated, watered and merrily anticipated a row of PIGWEED! It's surreal! I've been HAD! I mean, who does one report this situation?

So I've come clean. I've gone to the people so that you will be spared. So, after all of the above, here's a recipe! Big Smile!

Pat Bergford
Thurston County Master Gardener

Garlic Chicken Stir Fry with Quinoa

(off the Trader Joe's box)

- 1 cup organic quinoa prepared with chicken stock (cook like rice, 1 cup to 2 cups broth)
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 lb boneless, skinless chicken breast tenders
- 4 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 small onion, thinly sliced
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded and thinly sliced
- 1 yellow red pepper, seeded and thinly sliced
- 5 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 20 leaves fresh sweet basil, julienne
- parmesan cheese, grated
- salt and pepper, to taste

Cut chicken into 1 inch pieces. Heat large nonstick skillet over high heat and add the oil. Add chicken and sauté until peppers become slightly limp, but still bright, about 1 to 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Remove the pan from heat; add basil and quinoa. Toss until basil wilts. Sprinkle with parmesan cheese. Serves four.



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