

15/09/23



ZiMUNDA
FARMING

FARMER'S FRIDAY

Resuscitating Zimbabwe's Traditional Crops

The United Nations declared 2023 the International Year of the Millets. Millets, in their diversity, are affordable sources of nutrients for healthy diets that can be cultivated in adverse climates and arid regions with minimal external inputs.

The Zimbabwean diet was historically highly diverse and nutritious. Millets were grown in Zimbabwe for centuries until they lost their lustre when European food crops (and farming techniques) were introduced. Surplus millet produced after 1910 became unpopular and unmarketable as maize now dominated. This change in diets over the past 5 or 6 generations has taken a toll on the health and nutrition of Zimbabweans.

At the same time, crops like maize are agroecologically ill-suited for most regions of the country. Smallholder farmers struggle to produce them, and as rainfall patterns and distribution become an increasingly limiting effect of climate change, yields continue to decline, and crop failures become more and more common. A shift to drought-resistant, locally adapted crops (such as small grains and local legumes) helps smallholders diversify their production and ensure a more reliable, nutritious food supply for their families and the country.

The Zimbabwe Traditional and Organic Food Forum, a network of organisations whose aim is to increase the cultivation and consumption of nutritious traditional and organic foods, started the Good Food and Seed Festivals in response to these twin problems: a shortage of healthy

foods made from local ingredients available to Zimbabwean consumers, and limited markets for the traditional crops and plants that grow best for local producers.

The Good Food and Seed Festivals are the only event in Zimbabwe that bring smallholders together with consumers to interact, receive direct market feedback, and learn and exchange information, all in celebration of healthy, sustainably produced local food. During the seed fair day farmers from around Zimbabwe exchange seeds and knowledge on these seeds. The festival day has stalls selling a wide range of local produce, products and seeds including traditional grains, legumes and herbs, teas, cosmetics, appropriate technology, and small livestock, and locally adapted seed varieties; a food court offering diverse cuisines and dishes all made with Zimbabwean ingredients; cooking demonstrations and chefs' battles; activities for kids learning about traditional foods, nutrition, climate and agriculture, and traditional dance, music, stories, games and crafts; and live music.

The 2023 Good Food and Seed Festival is focusing on millets and chose svoboda as its special millet crop. Svoboda is a very interesting small grain. This forgotten millet was revived in Masvingo province. Svoboda is barnyard millet or *Echinochloa esculenta*. Svoboda is a local name in Bikita; there is a high probability that this grain is found in other parts of Zimbabwe under different names.

Masvingo province is a dry area. The region experiences low rainfall which is not evenly distributed; it suffers long



other farmers. It is our mandate to bring back what our elders used to grow and eat. Small grains perform well during drought and have many health advantages; svoboda is high in iron."

The small white, round grains have a nutty flavour and a slightly chewy texture. Svoboda grains are usually parboiled, dehulled and cooked and consumed like rice. The grain can also be roasted and ground into flour. Svoboda is also used to make traditional beer. Only millet grains can be used to perform rituals and appease ancestors.

periods of dry spells and hot summers. Climate change is devastating crop production.

Whilst discussing the grains farmers used to grow in the area, svoboda was mentioned for the first time. Mai Mukondo, a farmer from Bikita, had inherited a few seeds stored in a clay pot from her grandmother. During a seed show, the now late Mai Mukondo demonstrated the seed to farmers who showed great interest in it. From the handful of seeds left in her storeroom svoboda multiplied and the crop is now widely grown in Masvingo.

A farmer testifies: Svoboda is cost-effective. you don't need a lot of money to grow it. It is easier to harvest and grind than other millets. Birds, pests, and diseases rarely attack it both in the field and in the storeroom. If you harvest the crop if there is moisture it will continue to shoot and it takes 3 months to ripen. One can harvest three to four times from one plant. I have been able to grow enough for my family and I have also shared seed with

Join Chef Taf as this year again he's visiting all corners of the country, learning about svoboda and other millets; (<https://youtube.com/@PelumZimbabwe>)

And if like many farmers you'd like to start growing and consuming nearly forgotten crop varieties again, visit one of the district festivals organised across Zimbabwe, or the Harare Good Food and Seed Festival on 29-30 Sep 2023!

For more information on Zimbabwe's traditional crops and indigenous plants, check out our website (www.naturallyzimbabwean.com) and Facebook pages (@naturallyzimbabwean, @TOFFZim) and YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@goodfoodfestivalZW>)

Let's change diets, increase acreages under traditional food, and give hope to our smallholder farmers!

GOOD FOOD AND SEED FESTIVAL 2023

SEED FAIR COOKING DEMOS KIDS' ZONE
HEALTH SCREENING FOOD COURT FUN EXERCISES

LIVE MUSIC
NASIBO MARY ANIBAL
VICTOR KUNONGA VAZUKURU
VEAFRICA

SATURDAY 30 SEPTEMBER 2023
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