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Millet for the Environment and Better Nutrition



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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[ancient grain](#), [millet](#)



Americans today don't even know what millet is. Those who do probably think of it as bird food. But millet is a climate-resilient crop that produces nutritious food. Its potential for promoting food security more sustainably in a world affected by climate change is so great that the United Nations has declared 2023 the [International Year of Millets](#).

Ancient Grains

[Millets](#) are believed to be among the earliest domesticated plants. This grain family historically served as a traditional staple crop in many cultures. Millions of farmers, particularly in the dry zones of India, China, Nigeria, and other parts of Africa still rely on millet today. However, in the last century, the popularity of millets has waned dramatically in favor of rice, wheat, and corn. There are some 6,000 varieties of millet around the world. Pearl millet is the most widely produced variety intended for human consumption. But all millets share

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numerous health and environmental advantages. Lik^{CLOSE} [gumes](#) and [peanuts](#), millets are used as a healthy base for sustainable meals in many different food cultures.



Climate-Resilient Crop

Meat accounts for [nearly 10%](#) of the average American's climate emissions, but [vegetarian protein](#) sources have a much lower climate impact. The carbon footprint ([CO₂-eq](#)) of millets is nearly [25% less than wheat](#) and a bit lower than rice. Among cereal crops, millets are a remarkably [low-impact crop](#) for all environmental measures. Millets require little to no supplemental water, even in dry climates and soils with high salinity. They don't rely heavily on chemical inputs due to a natural resilience to pests. And they store well without refrigeration or other preservation. Because they use the highly efficient and resilient [C4 photosynthesis method](#), millets convert more carbon dioxide to oxygen, contributing to climate change mitigation.

Corn for grain makes up about a [28% share](#) of all U.S. crop area harvested in 2021, meaning that corn has the second largest crop area in the United States. This reliance on large-scale monocultures creates a food security risk that is heightened by the changing conditions and extreme weather events [resulting from climate change](#). In addition to their resilience in challenging environments, millets could improve food security by increasing the genetic diversity of seed stocks and diversifying global crop rotations.

The United Nations maintains that the increasing use of millet as a human cereal crop will support numerous [sustainable development goals](#), namely SDG 2 (zero hunger); SDG3 (good health and well-being); SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production); and SDG 13 (climate action).

Nutritional Benefits

Regardless of what protein you eat, grains make up the bulk of most people's diet. Unfortunately, Americans often fail to eat [enough whole grains](#), even as we continue to be the leading [consumers of corn](#) worldwide (most commonly in the form of corn syrup). While Americans tend to think of wheat as the primary

cereal choice, millets are gluten free. The [protein content of millets](#) varies widely by variety, but nearly all millets have more protein than rice. Foxtail and proso millets contain more protein than wheat, while the protein in the more common pearl millet is equivalent to wheat.

Overall, millets are among the [most nutritious](#) of all grains. They are rich in calcium, copper, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, and selenium as well as essential vitamins like folate, pantothenic acid, niacin, riboflavin, and vitamins B6, C, E, and K. They are high in fiber, resistant starch, and have a low glycemic index, which can help prevent or manage diabetes.



Eating Millet

[Adding millet to your diet](#) doesn't mean you have to eat birdseed. In America, millet is most accessible as flour. Like corn, millet is naturally sweet. That makes [millet flour](#) a great gluten-free alternative to wheat flour in baking. The small, round grains can be prepared as breakfast porridge. You can use them to supplement or replace rice or quinoa in dishes calling for those grains, using similar preparation methods. Millet is sometimes used in processed foods like puffed breakfast cereals or dried pastas. You can find millet in your grocery store's bulk bin section or online.

For cooks who really want to explore the possibilities of millet, consider one of these specialty cookbooks:

- [Marvelous Millet](#)
- [Ancient Grains](#)
- [Reboot Yourself with Millet Recipes](#)
- You will also find many millet recipes in gluten-free, whole grain, and ethnic cookbooks like [The Gluten-Free Asian Kitchen](#) and [Whole Grain Cookbook](#).

(If you purchase a book through one of the above affiliate links, we receive a small commission that helps fund our [Recycling Directory](#).)

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Recycling Mystery: Antifreeze



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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