

Millet vs. millets

Inconsistency of number in popular communication.

Reviews of use of both singular & plural forms within selected webpages
& online articles about millets

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What this is about

- Many articles about millets mix usage of the singular & mass-noun form “millet,” with the plural form “millets”
- “Millet” is most often read & understood as a singular noun, and grammatically is generally treated as a singular (e.g., “millet is”)
- The grains described are actually a group of distinct, though related, species most appropriately considered as a plural – “millets”
- The mixing of the two forms in articles can confuse readers
- It seems useful to bring some examples together to illustrate the problem, and to raise awareness among writers in order to improve practice as we head into the International Year of Millets (2023)

How this is presented

- This presentation shows example images from online articles & webpages, with comments and suggestions
- Each article/webpage reviewed is indicated in section title slides, with 1-3 slides following with images & comments
- A system of color underlining is used on the images for plural & appropriate singulars, problematic use of singular form, and unclear or ambiguous wording (this system is also noted in footer)
- Explanations of the issues identified, and suggestions how the wording could be improved, accompany each image
- This presentation does not otherwise review content
- The order of the items reviewed is roughly chronological

“Grasses and seeds can be nutritious!”

A selective review of a section of an article by Cathy Newkirk, published online by Michigan State University Extension, 28 Aug. 2015 (*1 slide*)

https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/grasses_and_seeds_can_be_nutritious

A tale of two paragraphs

This is one section of an article on “millet, teff and amaranth,” which consists of two paragraphs.

This section is presented with the commonly seen singular form “millet,” then uses the plural to describe these grains, followed by discussion of some specific millets.

The term “varieties,” however, often refers to cultivars. Millets are actually different species.

The second paragraph reverts to the singular, contrasting with the previous paragraph, where several millets were mentioned. Discussion of taste, nutritional profiles, fiber & protein content, and cooking characteristics across the several millets certainly presents a challenge, so this part would need a rewrite to harmonize with the previous paragraph.

https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/grasses_and_seeds_can_be_nutritious

1. **Millet**. There is actually a group of small-seeded grasses called millets. They are grown around the world as cereal crops or grains and are used as fodder as well as human consumption. The vast majority of millets are produced in developing countries such as India, Nigeria and Niger and have been cultivated in East Asia for the last 10,000 years! The most widely grown millet is pearl millet. Other varieties include finger millet, proso millet and foxtail millet.

Millet has a mild, sweet flavor and is gluten free. It's easy to cook because it cooks quickly and can be used as an alternative to rice in salads and stir-fries. You can also cook it as a breakfast cereal or add it uncooked to your bread mixes for a crunchy texture. Millet is a good source of iron, calcium, magnesium and B vitamins. A quarter cup of dry millet provides nine grams of fiber and seven grams of protein.

“Millet: How A Trendy Ancient Grain Turned Nomads Into Farmers”

A selective review of an article by Jeremy Cherfas published online by National Public Radio (NPR.org), 23 Dec. 2015 (*2 slides*)

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/12/23/460559052/millet-how-a-trendy-ancient-grain-turned-nomads-into-farmers>

A article taking two approaches

This article begins by discussing “millet” as a single grain, in the title (not pictured) and the first 4 paragraphs. At this point, a reader unfamiliar with the subject would get the clear idea that “millet” is one thing.

It would be fairly straightforward to shift to plurals, but that would make the lede’s comparison with amaranth and quinoa, and its use of the expression “an ‘it’ grain,” somewhat awkward.

Like amaranth and quinoa before it, millet – a hardy, gluten-free ancient seed – has become an “it” grain in recent years. Once dismissed as birdseed, millet can now be found sprinkled on top of mashed potatoes at top-rated restaurants, cooked into baby foods, and generally extolled for its nutritious virtues. Some have even dubbed millet “the new quinoa.”

This newly trendy grain was once far more prominent in human diets: It played a pivotal role in the rise of multi-crop agriculture and settled farming societies.

That’s according to research from Martin Jones, a professor of archaeology at Cambridge University in England, and co-leader of a team whose work on the origin and spread of millet this month won a 2015 Research Award from the Shanghai Archaeological Forum.

The research sheds light on the earliest days of agriculture in China. But more importantly, according to Jones, the prize may help millet to regain its rightful place in modern agriculture.

Shifting gears

The article then introduces the fact that “millet” is actually several grains, and continues more or less consistently to use the plural – “millets” – through to the end (there are numerous uses, which will not be shown in this presentation).

One exception is mention of mapping “the grain’s” relationship with people. Since the article just introduced 2 specific millets, this would be more clear as a plural possessive: “the grains”.

The use in the second paragraph at right of “varieties” – sometimes confusing in other articles when it’s not clear whether different species or cultivars of them are meant – is appropriate here, as it seems to refer to varieties of the two species under study.

Now, millet isn't just one grain but, rather, a ragbag group of small-seeded grasses. About 50 species of grass have been cultivated for their seeds. And while millets remain a staple in parts of Asia and Africa, they are in decline around the world, pushed out by larger-seeded, higher-yielding crops such as wheat, rice and corn. Jones and his colleagues studied two: broomcorn millet (*Paniceum miliaceum*) and foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*).

Radiocarbon dating of seeds from archaeological sites across China and Mongolia, along with DNA studies of modern varieties, enabled the researchers to piece together a sweeping chronology and map of the grain's relationship with people.

Archaeological remains show that these millets became common in their north China heartland around 7,500 years ago. Seeds recovered from sites of different ages show signs of being domesticated and selected — namely, they got bigger and bigger over time. Human skeletons of the same age show that millets were a staple food source.



THE SALT
Can Millet Take
First, It'll Need

“What are millets and can they help create global food security?”

A selective review of an article that appeared on DW.com, 9 June 2022 *(3 slides)*
<https://www.dw.com/en/sustainable-agriculture-ukraine-grain/a-61682721>

Title & kicker disagree

The title of this piece from DW, “What are millets and can they help create global food security?” is clear: Millets are something plural.

However the kicker then turns around and treats it as one thing: “an overlooked cereal”

Suggested solutions:

“these overlooked cereals”

“this group of overlooked cereals”

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Back & forth in mid-article

This section starts out well, with “grains” in the header and then leading with “millets.” But then in mid sentence there is reference to them as “a staple crop.” Suggested solution: Use “staple crops.”

The next paragraph, devoted to the term coined in India, “nutri-cereals,” is all in plural.

A photo caption then has “millet is the main crop in the Sahel,” where it would have been more helpful to specify “pearl millet.”

Ensuing uses of singular forms could easily be replaced as follows:

- “these ancient, humble grains
- “these cereals’ health benefits”
- “their ability”

A new era for old grains?

Millets have been around since 3000 BC and are believed to be among the earliest domesticated plants, long serving as a staple crop for millions of farmers, particularly in India, China and many parts of Africa.

Sometimes dubbed “nutri-cereals” due to their high levels of iron, fiber and certain vitamins, they are still grown in more than 130 countries. Yet they only play a significant role in the diets of some 90 million people in Africa and Asia, and are often regarded as food for the poor.

By comparison, around half the global population relies on rice, and more than one-third on wheat.



Millet is the main crop in the Sahel, where the lack of rainfall makes it hard to cultivate other crops

Yet with 2023 declared as the UN International Year of Millets, the fortunes of this ancient, humble grain could be on the cusp of changing. That, experts say, would be a good thing — not only due to the cereal's health benefits, but also its ability to thrive in tough conditions. And in a world marked by climate change, that rings with promise.

More complicated questions at the end

The picture caption “Millet comes in many different varieties” has, in addition to the singular/plural issue, the term “varieties,” which is more often associated with cultivars. Suggested solution: “Millets are a group of many different crop species.”

After use of the plural and reference to pearl millet (appropriately in singular), two other uses of singular could be readily changed to:

- “these unsung grains”
- “role of millets” or “roles of millets”

Use of “millet” as a modifier – “millet farmers” & “millet production” – is less of an issue, but could be changed as follows to better harmonize with use of plurals above:

- “minimum prices for farmers of millets”
- “production of millets”



Millet comes in many different varieties

Guru also said it's vital to secure a minimum price for millet farmers.

"Otherwise it often ends up benefiting only middlemen and not the farmer," he said.

Vettavalan Manikandan agrees. He is the president of a farming association in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where the government is set to boost production. "In my village, we sell pearl millet for 10 cents per kilo, but the same millet is packaged, branded and sold for about €1 in supermarkets in cities," he said.

He believes a growing global demand for millets would see cultivation move from dry to fertile lands, where the yield would be of both higher in quality and quantity — perhaps helping to change the stigma attached to this unsung grain.

Ethnobotanist King said perceptions are already beginning to shift, and he is optimistic about the role of millet moving forward.

"With improvement in technology and recipe creation, millet production may well eventually become a pillar in global food security," he said.

Edited by: Tamsin Walker

This article was last updated on June 9.



“Ending edible extinction: Why we need to revive global food diversity”

A selective review of sections of an article by Dan Saladino published on Greenbiz.com, 15 April 2022 (*3 slides*)

<https://www.greenbiz.com/article/ending-edible-extinction-why-we-need-revive-global-food-diversity>

Millets and their varieties

Use of singular (“millet”, “cereal” & pronoun) several times, but shifts to plural “millets” once in mid-paragraph

Reference to singular “millet” could readily be shifted to plural:

- “Millets are ... cereals”
- “millets’ unique nutritional qualities”
- “The decline of millets”

In this context, “varieties of millet” & “millet varieties” are ambiguous – millets are entirely different plants, not varieties of a generalized “millet.” However, each millet has its own varieties

In India, farmers are looking once again to landrace, or native, varieties of millet. Millet is a nutrient-packed and diverse cereal that sustained generations of people in India. But British colonizers, unaware of millet’s unique nutritional qualities and resilience, replaced it with varieties of bread wheat and cash crops such as indigo. Those millets that survived were mostly relegated to animal feed. The decline of millet continued after Indian independence and was intensified by the Green Revolution as rice cultivation expanded. As a result, the last harvests of many millet varieties were recorded in the early 1970s.

“ Despite its many achievements, the Green Revolution locked us into an unsustainable system. ”

Sometimes, the singular is appropriate

In the first paragraph, reference is to a specific kind of millet (raishan, *Digitaria compacta*), so the singular is appropriate

The 3rd use is ambiguous, however. Clearer to use “Raishan millet – labor intensive ...”

Shift to “millets” at end of the paragraph is consistent.

However in the third paragraph, the singular “millet” is then used where the plural “millets” would be indicated. In India itself, the plural is fairly consistently used now in promoting this group of grain crops in response to its food problems.

Among these was a millet grown by the Khasi people of Meghalaya, in northeast India. Their millet was called Raishan, an ivory-colored grain cooked into soups and baked into biscuits and flatbreads. Like millions of Indians, the Khasi became dependent on the state-run Public Distribution System, which today provides \$2.25 billion worth of subsidized food — mostly rice, wheat and sugar — to India’s poorest 160 million households. Millet — labor-intensive to harvest and to mill — was the first food they stopped growing themselves. Then, in 2008, in India and in the rest of rice-growing Asia, a huge supply crisis caused by a sequence of bad harvests, disease outbreaks and low grain reserves hit food systems. Governments responded by banning rice exports, which in turn triggered panic and a massive price spike. In many of the Khasi villages of Meghalaya, one response was to bring back lost millets.

In 2017, as part of the research for my book, I visited one of these villages, Nongtraw, at the bottom of a valley so steep it can only be reached by climbing down the 2,500 steps cut into the landscape. In one of the bamboo huts, I watched as a milling machine did in 10 seconds what used to take an hour with a pestle and mortar.

The Khasi villagers of Nongtraw now look like pioneers, as millet is being seen as one solution to many of India’s food problems. With a diet that became heavily dependent on modern varieties of white rice and refined wheat flour, India suffers from a triple burden of malnutrition: One in nine people is undernourished; one in eight adults is obese; and one in five people is affected by some form of micronutrient deficiency.

Finishing with using the plural

Following the problematic use of the singular “millet” in the last paragraph on the previous slide, the plural “millets” is used here

Dan Saladino’s article includes important information on millets, but the reader must navigate several shifts in number, some of which make complete sense (when discussing a specific kind of millet), and others of which are inconsistent (e.g., use of “millet” in discussing these cereals’ importance in addressing food issues, but then “millets” when discussing their broader importance wrt water, climate & nutrition)

(The millet held by a woman’s hand in the photo is finger millet - Eleusine coracana)



Another problem facing India is water — or the lack of it. Half of India’s rice crop is irrigated by underground water supplies, and Indian aquifers are emptying at a faster rate than they are being replenished. When a team of scientists — including water experts, plant breeders and nutritionists — calculated what would happen if large areas of water-intensive rice cultivation were replaced with millets and sorghum, they found benefits on every level: more dietary nutrients, lower greenhouse gas emissions, greater resilience to climate change, reduced water and energy use. All of this could be achieved without losing a single calorie or expanding croplands, they concluded.

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