Intriguing World of Weeds

Yellow Nutsedge *Cyperus esculentus* L.—Snack Food of the Gods

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No more the grassy brook reflects the day,
But, chocked with sedges, works its weedy way;

*The Deserted Village*, Oliver Goldsmith, 1770.

**INTRODUCTION**

Yellow nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus* L.) is a perennial herbaceous sedge native to the eastern Mediterranean (Mabberley 1997; Tutin et al. 1980; Zeven and Zhukovsky 1975). Cultivated in ancient Egypt for its tasty and oil-rich tubers, the wild type has spread as a weed to all the continents of the world and adapted to climates from tropical to subarctic. Adaptability to many agricultural habitats and the great reproductive capacity of yellow nutsedge have propelled it to rank as the 16th worst weed in the world (Holm et al. 1991a, 1991b). *Cyperus papyrus* L. is another famous sedge used to make sheets of “papyrus” (Greek for “paper”) from ancient times until the eighth century AD (Mabberley 1997; Zomlefer 1994). *Cyperus esculentus* was the binomial name assigned to yellow nutsedge by Carl Linnaeus in his *Species Plantarum* in 1753 (Britton and Brown 1913). The genus name *Cyperus* comes from the Greek “Kypeiron” that Theophrastus (372 to 287 BC) used for the sedges. Pliny (AD 23 to 79) called the nutsedges “cyperos” and “cyperis” (Negbi 1992). The species name *esculentus* is Greek for “edible” referring to the edible tubers (Gledhill 1989).

There have been numerous attempts to classify and name varieties within the species. Wild yellow nutsedge has a wide variation in growth habit and especially inflorescence characteristics. The most obvious variety is the cultivated *Cyperus esculentus* L. var. *sativus* Boeck, most commonly known as chufa (Mabberley 1997). Chufas rarely flower, are not frost tolerant, have a less aggressive growth habit, and have tubers with higher oil and starch content than weedy varieties (De Vries 1991). The most recent attempt to define the weedy varieties of yellow nutsedge split them into four groups. All four varieties were found to occur in the Americas and Europe (Schippers et al. 1995). But Yatskievych contested this and stated that the infraspecific classification of wild yellow nutsedge seemed unwarranted (Yatskievych 1999).

The ancient Egyptians called it “gyw,” Theophrastus called it “malinathalle” (tubers) of “mnansion” (*Cyperus esculentus*), and Pliny called it “anthaliun” (Darby et al. 1977; Gerard 1633; Negbi 1992). Yellow nutsedge is the currently accepted common name (Weed Science Society of America 1989). There are many other names for both the weedy and cultivated types most of which refer to either the grass-like appearance or the edible underground tubers. Chufa, chufa flatsedge, coco, coconut, earth-almond, edible galingale, ground almond, Hab ’el aziz (“the precious grain” or “the grain of the precious” in Egypt), northern nutgrass, rush nut, tiger nut, yellow nutgrass, and Zulu nut are frequently encountered names (Britton and Brown 1913; Darby et al. 1977; De