

The American Lotus is as useful as it is beautiful

To the ancient Egyptians, the lotus was a symbol of rebirth, to the Buddhists it is a sign of enlightenment and to Hindus it is a symbol of beauty, prosperity and fertility. There are two species of lotus, one from Asia and one native to America. Both are emergent aquatic plants that grow in lakes, swamps and flood areas. The lotus is truly one of the most spectacular plants in the aquatic world and has a fascinating history. Throughout time it has proven to be as useful as it is beautiful.

The American Lotus's (*Nelumbonacea lutea*) roots are anchored in the mud while the petioles, leaves and flowers emerge up to 6 feet above the water's surface. Flowering begins in late spring and continues into the summer months. The spectacular bloom may be white to pale yellow and measure from 7 – 11 inches wide and has a pleasant fragrance. Once the petals fall from the flower, they are replaced by a flat-topped seed pod, which is divided into many compartments, where the seeds are located. The seed pod resembles a wasp's nest and makes a very interesting decoration in flower arrangements. The seed pod remains on the plant until late fall. Once the seeds are released, they sink to the mud and produce new plants.

Almost every part of the lotus plant is edible. The tubers can be sliced and served as a refreshing vegetable that is said to taste similar to a sweet potato. The stamens can be dried and made into a fragrant herbal tea. The young leaves of the Asian lotus can be steamed like spinach or watercress. And the long stalks can be cut and drained to produce a wine type of substance. The Native Americans used the large root as a food source, which are often pickled with rice vinegar, sugar, chili and/or garlic. In Asian cuisine, it is popular with salad, prawns, sesame oil and/or coriander leaves. Lotus roots have been found to be rich in dietary fiber, vitamin C, potassium, thiamin, riboflavin, vitamin B6, phosphorus, copper, and manganese, while very low in saturated fat.

The lotus seeds or nuts are quite versatile and can be eaten raw or dried and popped like popcorn. In China, combined with sugar, lotus seed paste becomes one of the most common ingredients used in many pastries. And in the Southern United States, the Cajun population enjoys consuming the seeds, which they call "graine a voler," which translates "flying seed." The name comes from the idea that the seeds can actually pop out of the pods on their own as the seedpods dry out. It is said that the seeds not only taste good, but are an excellent source of protein.

The lotus is also believed to have health benefits. The seeds have been used to stop chronic diarrhea. According to the Institute for Traditional Medicine in Portland, Oregon, the seeds also alleviate restlessness, palpitations and insomnia. The Chinese use the herb mainly for the spleen, heart, kidneys and its calming qualities.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating facts about this flower is that it can actually regulate its own temperature in order to benefit the insects it requires to reproduce. When the plant flowers, it heats its blossoms to above 86 degrees F for up to four days

even when the air temperature is 50 degrees F. The heat releases an aroma that attracts some insects. The insect will then fly into the flower and feed on the nectar and pollen. Not only does this benefit the lotus flower by pollination, but the insect has a warm place to go which enhances its ability to eat, mate and fly.

The lotus flower has been featured throughout history in religion, art and innumerable legends. The ancient Egyptians greatly valued the sacred lotus in their religious ceremonies and funerals. In works of art it has been used as a border to outline sections of artwork or seen in the hand of a god or human. Countless legends exist about the lotus's attributes. In India, the unique significance of the lotus has more symbolic application - material and spiritual, than any other symbol in their arts, religions and systems of thought.

Historically, the lotus has been revered as a symbol of many different things to many different people. However, its unusual and unique beauty is something we can all enjoy. We are so fortunate in Highlands County to have so many beautiful lakes and wetlands where these flowers are abundant. Take the time to get out and enjoy what nature has to offer and see for yourself if the lotus is worthy of its reputation.