

# DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

## FAT HEN SEED ‘FURIKAKE’: UMAMI SPRINKLE FOR RICE

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*Fat hen seed furikake (left) and a fat hen (*Chenopodium album*) plant with seed heads (right)*

‘Furikake’ is a type of Japanese condiment that is sprinkled over savoury dishes. Traditionally, it was a way of recycling and preserving small amounts of left-over ingredients, or scraps from making other foods and dishes. Thickly flavoured and packed with the umami, furikake remains a popular standby item at the Japanese dining table, bringing the life to the blandest of foods such as steamed rice—and a great way to make kids eat that last bit of rice remaining in their bowl!

Fat hen (*Chenopodium album*) is an Eurasian annual plant commonly found as a weed in temperate areas of Australia. In Japan, fat hen (known as ‘shiroza’) has traditionally been one of the many wild plants seasonally foraged as food—a custom dating back to the prehistoric Jōmon culture of Japan. Fat hen was particularly valued as food during and after World War II, when food was scarce and the plant grew in abundance among the rubbles after the Allied bombing of Japanese cities and towns. Both the leaves and seeds have traditionally been used as food, and as folk medicine for their potent anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant and digestive effects. In fact, the nutritional and medicinal properties of fat hen are comparable, if not superior to its close relatives quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*) and the English spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*), e.g. see

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275224006\\_Chenopodium\\_album\\_Linn\\_review\\_of\\_nutritive\\_value\\_and\\_biological\\_properties](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275224006_Chenopodium_album_Linn_review_of_nutritive_value_and_biological_properties).



*Seed capsules of fat hen (is it just my imagination or they look disconcertingly like a certain virus that is wreaking havoc around the world at the moment...)*

Here is an old-fashioned country recipe for a furikake made with fat hen seeds and seed capsules. If collecting fat hen seeds from your garden, take care not to scatter the thousands of seeds over your garden in the process, otherwise you'll end up with a whole field of fat hen next spring! The most tedious part is removing the small seed capsules from the stem; a good job perhaps for a rainy Sunday afternoon with a glass or cup of your favourite drink by your side. Feel free to vary the proportions of flavouring according to your preference. For a completely vegetarian option, leave out the katsuobushi (smoked bonito flakes).

**[IMPORTANT NOTE: NEVER consume weeds or wild plants unless you can identify them with 100% confidence. Do NOT collect edible plants from areas that may have been sprayed with chemicals, are polluted with heavy metals and other substances (e.g. near roads, painted surfaces and industrial activity), or contaminated by human or animal excrement. Many edible plants also require treatment or cooking to remove harmful substances such as toxins and anti-nutrients. Always consume fat hen cooked as the raw plant contains a high proportion of oxalic acid, which can harm your health.]**

## INGREDIENTS

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| • Fat hen seeds and seed capsules   | c. 1 cup  |
| • Soy sauce or tamari   | 2 to 3 level tablespoons or to taste                          |
| • Sugar   | ½ level tablespoon or to taste                                |
| • Katsuobushi (smoked bonito flakes),<br>crushed finely if large pieces are present | c. 1 level teaspoon   |
| • Chilli, finely chopped or dried chilli<br>flakes (optional)                       | To taste  |
| • Water   | Enough to just cover the mixture in the saucepan<br>initially |



## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Pluck the seed capsules off the stems. Some leaves can be included, but not the wiry-textured stem or leaf stalk. You may wish lay a large sheet of paper over your workspace, as thousands of tiny seeds will be scattered out of the seed capsules.



2. Combine all ingredients in a saucepan, and bring to the boil on medium heat stirring frequently to prevent burning.



3. Reduce the heat to low, cover with a lid, and gently boil for c. 30 minutes or until the liquid has evaporated and the seeds are starting to soften—they should be like poppy seeds; undercooked seeds are hard like sand grains. Stir regularly to prevent the mixture burning onto the bottom of the saucepan—the soy sauce and sugar burn easily. Add a little water if the liquid has evaporated but the seeds need further cooking. Remove from heat, set aside and allow to cool.



4. Enjoy your fat hen seed furikake sprinkled over steamed rice or zōsui (Japanese rice porridge), together with tsukemono (Japanese pickles) or other condiments. The fat hen seeds have a somewhat gritty feel that adds textural interest to noodle and vegetable dishes as well. Your furikake should keep in the refrigerator for several weeks.



*Boiled cha-soba (green tea soba noodles) topped with fat hen furikake and oboro-konbu (vinegared konbu seaweed shavings)*