

Siberian Melic Grass – *Melica altissima*

Almost two meters high, with flowers like pearls on a string, this is how it can be seen in its only habitat in Austria, the National Park Thayatal. Siberian melic grass is listed as highly endangered in the Red Lists. The plant likes light, dry forests with rocky soil, but it also tolerates soils with a higher concentration of nutrients. It blooms in June and overwinters as a resistant hemicryptophyte, growing underground tillers.

Melic belongs to the smooth grass family (poaceae) and its flowers are characteristically arranged in spikelets, each spikelet having one or more florets, their bracts, also called glumes, agglutinating to form an elaiosome (= nutriment). This is produced by plants using ants to disperse their seeds (so-called myrmecochory). The elaiosome is only destined to be eaten. Ants carry the seeds to their nests, but as not all of them make it, the seeds are dispersed. This is a special feature as smooth grasses normally use wind as only disseminating media.

It is however unclear why Karl von Linné chose the name of melica. Some think he was inspired by the similar-sounding medieval name for millet, which was also used in dog Latin. They meant in particular proso millet or hog millet (*Panicum miliaceum*), bearing a strong resemblance to melic, which has been cultivated in China since the 4th century B.C. and was already introduced into Europe in early antiquity. Others say that Linné could not think of anything better than to christen the new species with the sweet-tasting stalk after the Greek name for honey (meli).

It also has various popular names in Austria and Switzerland.