

Common Cattail

Typha latifolia

Cattails are tall grasses that can be found throughout the world and are some of the most useful plants in the wild, sometimes referred to as the Wal-Mart of the swamp.

They are most often found in dense stands along the shores of marshes, ponds, lakes, or rivers where they can grow to almost 10 feet tall. Leaves are about one inch wide, and the flower has two parts: a brown cylinder (the female part) and a yellow spike (the male part).

Two species are most common in U.S.: broad leaved cattail (*T. latifolia*) and narrow leaf cattail (*T. angustifolia*). The broad leaved are the ones found in Corkscrew, especially in the fish farm and in the marshes surrounding the north observation tower.

Under the right conditions, cattails grow and spread vigorously. Common Cattails flower from May to July and need to have “wet feet” during most of the growing season. In early fall, the brown flower head pops open, letting its fluffy seeds emerge. These seeds are carried by wind or water to new places.

Common Cattails are prolific and each spike may contain over 200,000 tiny seeds. At maturity, the spike bursts and the fruits are released.

Each fruit has bristly hairs that aid in wind dispersal. When the fruit comes in contact with water, the pericarp opens rapidly, releasing the seed which then sinks. In wet weather, the fruits often fall to the ground in dense mats.

Seeds are capable of germination immediately, but they require moist or wet substrates, warm temperatures, low oxygen concentrations, and long day/short night exposures.

Within established stands, seedlings are practically nonexistent because the existing vegetative cover greatly reduces light and temperature for germination.

Just as commonly, cattails spread through their root system. The thick, white roots, called rhizomes, grow underground near the edge of ponds and in shallow swales. As long as the water is not too deep, the cattails feast off the



open sunshine and abundant water, storing a large amount of food in the root system.

New shoots grow quickly from the rhizomes, which creates thick stands which are great cover for the many animals that live among them. However, the dense foliage and debris from old growth makes it very difficult for competing plant species to grow.

Red-winged Blackbirds are probably the animal most associated with cattails, perching and nesting in the cattails. Marsh Wrens are also frequent cattail nesters. Many other species of birds use the fluff to line their nests.

Besides birds, frogs and salamanders will lay their eggs in the water on and between them and fish will hide or nest among them.

White-tailed Deer, Raccoons, Eastern Cottontails, and Turkey all use cattails as cover. Many species of insects eat and live on them.

Cattails are even more useful for people.

According to the USDA, all parts of the cattail are edible if gathered at

the right time. Young shoots cut from the rhizomes in the spring when they are about 4-16 inches high taste like cucumber and can be made into pickles. When steamed, they taste like cabbage.

The base of the stem where it attaches to the rhizome can be boiled or roasted like potatoes. Young flower stalks can be taken out of their sheaths and be boiled or steamed just like corn.

Cattail pollen can also be collected from the seed head and substituted for flour.

Rhizomes and lower stems have a sweet flavor and can be eaten raw, baked, roasted, or broiled. The rhizomes are fairly high in starch content, usually around 30-46%. The core can be ground into flour which would probably contain about 80% carbohydrates and around 6-8% protein.

Newly emerging shoots are edible with the delicate flavor and crispy asparagus-like texture. When mixed with tallow, the brown fuzz can be chewed like gum.

In addition to providing a foraged feast, cattails also have several medicinal benefits. The gel found between leaves makes a topical anesthetic, and a poultice made from the roots can be applied to cuts, burns and stings.

Leaves and stems have been used as bedding, thatching, and matting and in the manufacture of baskets, boats and rafts, shoes, ropes, and paper.

Cattails are a source of fiber for rayon and have been used in torches and as tinder.

In recent years, cattails have been proposed as a biomass crop for renewable energy, and since cattails appear around the world, they are a potential food crop.

Cattails have shown a tolerance to high concentrations of lead, zinc, copper, nickel, and phosphorous. They have been employed in secondary waste water treatment schemes to cleanse the water. Some are performing that duty in the Living Machine at Corkscrew.