

Cattail

Get out your waders or rubber boots! Cattails grow on the margins of ponds or in marshes and wetland areas. These incredibly useful plants have been used for many things including food, medicine, shelter, tools, fiber, clothing, insulation, diapers and dolls.



Other names: *Typha latifolia*. Whulshootseed: ʔulal

Identifying Cattail: Cattails grow in communities and are connected by underwater networks of rhizomes. Long, flat, spongy green leaves emerge in bundles and look like giant blades of grass. They are 1-2 inches wide and grow 3-10 feet tall. The base of the leaves feels spongy because they contain air-filled cellular tubes called aerenchyma, which carry oxygen down to the base of the plant. This adaptation helps cattail roots to live underwater. Tiny cattail male and female flowers form on a single long, brown spike that emerges from the center of the plant on a tall, round stem. Once fertilized, the female flowers swell into the brown sausage-looking “cattail” spikes. These eventually turn to fluffy white plumes that are filled with seeds and are readily carried in the wind.

Where it Grows: Cattails grow in swamps, marshes, bogs, wetlands, and in moist ditches on the side of the road. They are found throughout North and South America, along with Europe, Africa and Asia. Cattail is native to all US states except Hawaii.

Season: Leaf shoots are edible in early spring. Flowers and pollen are gathered in summer. Leaves are harvested for basketry when fully formed in late summer. Underwater rhizomes are harvested in fall.

Harvesting Cattail: Harvest in clean, pristine areas to avoid contamination. Do not harvest near heavy agricultural areas, dairy fields or roadsides. Wash with boiling water before consuming. Leave the oldest plants and the ones on the edges. These are the soldiers that help to hold and protect the plant community from invasive species like yellow flag iris and reed canary grass. As with all plant gathering, harvest with care to be sure to never remove more than you need, and no more than 10% of a stand. Correctly identifying cattail is of utmost importance when it is not in flower. The toxic yellow flag iris leaf looks similar, but the stem is flattened or elliptical and has a vein down the center, while cattail is round stemmed and spongy.



Eating Cattail: Cattails provide nutritious food in the spring through fall. In early spring, the base of the new shoots is cut off and the outer leaves are removed, revealing tender white to light green leaves that resemble leeks. These cattail hearts can be eaten fresh or lightly cooked and added to stir-fry.

In late spring to summer, immature flower spikes are ready for harvest. Peel the outer sheaf back to reveal

the spike, which looks like baby corn. This can be steamed, boiled or sautéed and has a pleasant flavor like artichoke. Gently nibble off the flower and leave behind the strong inner core.

In summer the male flower on top of the spike produces pollen to fertilize the female flower just below it. Pollen is harvested by placing a sack or wide-mouthed milk jug over the brown flowering spike and shaking it. Cattail pollen can be used similarly to bee pollen for energy and as a source of protein. It is delicious when added to biscuits, muffins or pancakes. You may need to use a fine sieve to separate out bugs. Freeze the pollen for long-term storage.

The starchy potato-like rhizome is best harvested in the fall, but can be harvested throughout the year. They are fibrous and can be dried, pounded and then sifted to remove the starchy powder. You can also soak the fresh or dried roots in water to make a thick soup base. Cattail offers more edible starch per acre than potato, rice, taro or yams!



Cattail Medicine: Cattail is rich in beta-carotene, niacin, riboflavin, thiamin, potassium, phosphorus, protein, amino acids and vitamin C. Like aloe vera, cattail leaf contains gel that keeps the plant moist when water levels drop. It also has antimicrobial properties that protect the plant from insects and diseases. People apply cattail gel to their skin as a first aid remedy to soothe burns and to ward off infection.

Traditional Technologies: The long, straight, and fully mature leaves of cattail are used by people all over the world as a weaving material for making mats, baskets and cordage. Northwest Coast Native People have used cattail mats as screens, fans, seats, sleeping and kneeling mats, insulating wall covers, and to cover cooking pits and bentwood boxes. Cattail has also been used to make quick containers and gathering baskets, as well as temporary walls for shelters in the summertime. The waterproof cattail leaves swell when wet, providing a tighter protective wall, and shrink a little when dry, allowing a gentle breeze in on hot days. Though not very durable, cattail mats are easy to make. A needle made from ironwood was used to push through the leaves to sew them together, but it takes a lot of force. A creaser is used to compress or hold the leaf in place. Rain capes were made out of cattail because of its ability to shed water and insulate the person under it. A beautiful rain cape is on display at the Burke Museum of Natural History in Seattle, WA. Cattail materials are a prime example of skillful traditional technology.



Matt Warbis with a cattail needle, Lummi

The fluffy winter seed heads are traditionally used for diapers, padding, insulation, pillows and can extend wool. If using the fluff for pillows, use thick fabric to seal in the cattail fluff because it can cause hives. The seeds can also be used as a thickening agent. Cattail stalk can be lit and used as a torch or a fire starter.

Ecological relationships: Wetlands include the margins of lakes and ponds, shallow freshwater marshes and peat bogs. Food plants specially adapted to these wet conditions include cattail, wapato and bog cranberry. Many basketry plants including cattail, tule, sedges and willows are harvested from wetlands. Birds including ducks and geese rely on these areas for feeding and nesting grounds. Red winged blackbirds, herons, turtles, muskrats, frogs and fish are all at home in cattail ponds.

Many wetlands in the Pacific Northwest have been drained and developed into farmland or suburban areas. Join your local wetland restoration efforts to preserve native plants and wildlife habitat of this important cultural ecosystem.

In some native languages the term for plants translates to “those who take care of us.” Through natural selection the cattails developed sophisticated adaptations that increase their survival in the marsh. The people were attentive students and borrowed solutions from the plants, which increased their likelihood of survival. The plants adapt, the people adopt.

-Robin Wall Kimmerer

Additional Resources:

Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Section entitled “Sitting in a Circle.”

Pacific Northwest Foraging by Douglas Deur

The People of Cascadia by Heidi Bohan

The Foragers Harvest by Samuel Thayer

Keeping it Living by Douglas Deur and Nancy Turner

Photos by Elise Krohn except cattail in pond (istock) and cattail pollen (Abe Lloyd)



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Cattail on the Cob

A delicious and simple way to enjoy cattail flower heads!

You will need:

- Young cattail flowers
- A pot with a tight fitting lid and a steamer basket
- 1 cup of water
- Butter and salt to taste



1. Harvest the male and female flowering heads in the spring to early summer by clipping with scissors or a knife. You will find the flowering heads in the center of the cattail plant. Peel away the outer sheaf. You will see the top male flower and the bottom female flower. They can both be used, however, the top male flower has more “meat” to it.
2. Bring water to boil.
3. Wash cattails.
4. Add steam basket full of cattail flower heads to boiling water. Turn heat down to low, cover and steam for 10-12 minutes.
5. Add butter and salt to your liking. Nibble stalk as if you were eating a tiny corn on the cob. The center of the stalk is tough, but the outer cattail flower is tender, nutritious and delicious!

Cattail Quinoa salad

Quinoa is a nutty tasting grain that is high in protein and low in carbohydrates. This recipe can be adapted with a variety of seasonal vegetables and is delicious served hot or cold.

- 1 cup quinoa
- 2 cups water
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 carrots, diced
- 1 cup spring cattail shoots, rinsed in boiling water and chopped
- 2 tablespoons chopped wild onions or ½ cup green onions
- 1 cup smoked salmon, cubed
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and pepper to taste



Rinse quinoa. Boil water in a medium sized pan, add quinoa, then turn down to simmer and cover until cooked, about 15 minutes. Add olive oil to a medium sized sauté pan and heat on medium. Add onions, garlic and carrots, and sauté until onions are translucent. Add cattails and onion tops and sauté until tender. Add cooked quinoa, salmon, lemon juice, salt and pepper. Blend and serve.

Cook time: 40 minutes. Serves 4.

Making a Cattail Mat

Materials: Dried cattail leaves, furniture legs (barstool), poles in the ground, or other object to hold leaves in place, Ironwood needle or large upholstery needle, sewing fiber (could be sinew, nettle cordage, hemp or strong twine)
*Optional- mist bottle.



Harvesting cattail leaves for mats: you can weave or sew fresh leaves, but when they dry out, you are left with a shrunken, loose mat. For a nice tightly woven mat, dry leaves first and then rehydrate them when you are ready to weave. Leaves can be dried in a well single layer, on screens or a sheet for about 1-2 weeks. Take care to turn them over at least once a day to ensure even drying and to prevent mold. Drying leaves in the sun can damage the leaves and make them too brittle to work with. Once dried, the delicate leaves can be wrapped in paper or cardboard until you are ready to use them.

A Closer Look: Cut cross sections of a cattail leaf and notice the holes or tubes that run up the length of the leaf. Cattail is an excellent insulator because it traps air inside the leaf. Woven mats create a buffer that keeps cold outside of a house or tent during winter. During the summer months, the mats create a cool wicking layer for heat to escape.

Cattail Mat Making: Depending on how much material you have, your cattail mat can be as small as a coaster or larger. Smaller children can do an over and under simple weave instead of sewing the leaves together.

1. Begin with dry cattail leaves. Rehydrate leaves in a bucket or sink to make pliable again.
2. If you are sewing the cattail leaves, cut the edges of the leaf length wise so they will be easier to sew and more uniform in width.
3. Cut the cattail leaves to the length of the mat you desire. Arrange the leaves in similar size, alternating wide end to narrow end. This will give your mat a nice uniform shape.
4. Tie cord to furniture legs or poles horizontally to desired length of mat. Place leaves along cord. Fold tops of leaves over cord and twist weave cordage around each leaf to secure in place.
5. Sew through the middle of each leaf every 3-6 inches down, depending on the size of your mat. You will need to gently press/hold the leaf as you sew to make sure the leaf doesn't break. Continue to sew through the leaves every 3-6 inches until you have reached the bottom.
6. Finish the bottom as you did the top by twist weaving the leaves over. Trim leaves for a nice even finish.

Additional Resources:

Visit YouTube for "how to make a cattail mat" tutorials.

