

Cattails



Cattail Shoot, Immature and Mature Flower Heads

The cattail is one of the most important and common wild foods, with a variety of uses at different times of the year. Whatever you call it, a stand of cattails is as close as you'll get to finding a wild supermarket.

You can easily recognize a cattail stand: White, dense, furry, cigar-shaped overwintered seed heads stand atop very long, stout stalks, even as the young shoots first emerge in early spring.



Cattail Seed Head

The immature sword-like, pointed leaves, with parallel veins, resemble other wetland plants, but last year's stalks provide positive identification.



Cattail Shoot

By late spring, the light green leaves reach nearly nine feet tall, forming a sheath where they tightly embrace the stalk's base. The leaves hide the new flower head until it nears maturity. Peel them back to reveal it. The plant is so primitive—dating back to the time of the dinosaurs—that male and female flowers are separate on the stiff, two-parted flower head: the pollen-producing male is always on top, while the seed-bearing female is forever relegated to the bottom. Clearly, this species evolved long before the Sexual Revolution. (Biological speaking, this arrangement is effective because the male part withers away when its job is done, whereas the female part must remain connected to the rest of the plant until the seeds have matured and dispersed.)



Mature Cattail Flower

Once fertilized, the female flowers transform into the familiar brown "cigars"—also called candlewicks, punks, ducktails, and marsh beetles—consisting of thousands of tiny developing seeds. They whiten over the winter after the leaves die, and the cycle repeats. Cattails grow in dense stands. Like most colonial plants, they arise from rhizomes—thick stems, growing in the mud, usually connecting all the stalks.

A cattail stand is like a branching shrub lying on its side under the mud, with only the leaves and blossoms visible.

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The two most widespread species in the United States are the common cattail (*Typha latifolia*), which is larger and bears more food, and the narrow-leaf cattail (*Typha angustifolia*), also quite good.

People sometimes confuse cattails with the very common grass-like non-poisonous reeds (*Phragmites species*), which form dense stands twelve feet tall. But reeds have flag-like flowers, and leaves originating along the stalks. When the two species compete, reeds tolerate more salt, and wins out on land. But they can't grow in shallow water, like cattails.

The reed's young shoot is barely edible in early spring. After lots of peeling, the small yield tastes so bad, you'll be glad there's no more. When this was one of the few plants I could identify, I also wasted time and effort trying to extract very scant starch from reed rhizomes, and searching for the "edible" seeds as rare as hen's teeth. Following the advice of authors who hadn't tried their own suggestions, I learned the hard way to leave the reeds to the wildlife and woodwind players.

Caution: Young cattail shoots resemble non-poisonous calamus (Acorus calamus), and poisonous daffodil (Amaryllidaceae) and iris (Iris species) shoots, which have similar leaves. Blue Flag (Iris versicolor) and Yellow Flag (Iris pseudoacorus) and other members of the iris family all possess the cattail-like leaves, but none possesses the brown seed head. All members of the Iris family are poisonous. If a stand is still topped by last year's cottony seed heads, you know you have the right plant. In spring, the cattail shoot has an odorless, tender, white, inner core that tastes sweet, mild, and pleasant—a far cry from the bitter poisonous plants, or the spicy, fragrant calamus. None of the look-alikes grows more than a few feet tall, so by mid-spring, the much larger cattail becomes unmistakable, even for beginners.

Cattails grow in marshes, swamps, ditches, and stagnant water—fresh or slightly brackish—worldwide. Finding them is a sure sign of water. Military survival specialist and author, Tom Squier, once found them completely out of habitat, in a dry, sandy pine forest. A short search revealed an open manhole from an abandoned storm sewer system, full of water.

The cattail's every part has uses. It's easy to harvest, very tasty, and highly nutritious. It was a major staple for the American Indians, who found it in such great supply, they didn't need to cultivate it. The settlers missed out when they ignored this great food and destroyed its habitats, instead of cultivating it.

Before the flower forms, the shoots—prized as "Cossack's asparagus" in Russia—are fantastic. You can peel and eat them well into the summer.



Heart of Cattail

The result of peeling the shoot

They're like a combination of tender zucchini and cucumbers, adding a refreshing texture and flavor to salads. I love mixing them with pungent mustard greens to balance their mildness. Added to soup towards the end of cooking, they retain a refreshing crunchiness. They're superb in stir-fry dishes, more than suitable for sandwiches, and excellent in virtually any context. I love sliced cattail hearts, sautéed in sesame oil with wild carrots and ginger.

Harvest cattail shoots after some dry weather, when the ground is solid, in the least muddy locations. Select the largest shoots that haven't begun to flower, and use both hands to separate the outer leaves from the core, all the way to the base of the plant. Now grab the inner core with both hands, as close to the base as possible, and pull it out. Peel and discard the outermost layers of leaves from the top down, until you reach the edible part, which is soft enough to pinch through with your thumbnail (the rule-of-thumb). There are more layers to discard toward the top, so you must do more peeling there. Cut off completely tough upper parts with a pocket knife or garden shears in the field, so you'll have less to carry. Note: Collecting shoots will cover your hands with a sticky, mucilaginous jelly. Scrape it off the plant into a plastic bag, and use it to impart a slight okra-like thickening effect to soups. The shoot provide beta carotene, niacin, riboflavin, thiamine, potassium, phosphorus, and vitamin C.

The proportions of food to waste varies with the size of the shoot. You'll get the best yield just before the flowers begin to develop. A few huge, late-spring stalks provide enough delicious food for a meal. Some stalks grow tall, and become inedibly fibrous with developing flowers by late spring, although just before the summer solstice, you can often gather tender shoots, immature flower heads, and pollen at the same time.

You can clip off and eat the male portions of the immature, green, flower head. Steam or simmer it for ten minutes. It tastes vaguely like its distant relative, corn, and there's even a central cob-like core. Because it's dry, serve it with a topping of sauce, seasoned oil, or butter. Sometimes I also gnaw on the cooked female portions, but there's very little to them. It's easier to remove the flesh from the woody core, if desired, after steaming. This adds a rich, filling element to any dish, and it's one of the best wild vegetarian sources of protein, unsaturated fat, and calories. It also provides beta-carotene and minerals.

When the male flowers ripen, just before the summer solstice, they produce considerable quantities of golden pollen. People pay outrageous prices in health stores for tiny capsules of the bee pollen—a source of minerals, enzymes, protein, and energy. Cattail pollen beats the commercial variety in flavor, energy content, freshness, nutrition, and price. To collect the pollen in its short season, wait for a few calm days, so your harvest isn't scattered by wind. Bend the flower heads into a large paper bag and shake it gently. Keep the bag's opening as narrow as possible, so the pollen won't blow away.

Sift out the trash, and use the pollen as golden flour in baking breads, muffins, pancakes, or waffles.

It doesn't rise, and it's time-consuming to collect in quantity, so I generally mix it with at least three times as much whole-grain flour. You can also eat the pollen raw, sprinkled on yogurt, fruit shakes, oatmeal, and salads.

During fall, winter, and early spring, the cattail rhizomes store food. Digging up the thick, matted rhizomes from the muck, especially in cold weather, is not easy. After years of procrastination, I determined that, as a foraging teacher, the time had come to experiment with cattail rhizomes. Late one autumn, a friend and I went to gather cattail rhizomes from Central Park. It was so messy, I emerged from the park splattered with muck, looking more like a wildman than I had ever intended. We hauled two dripping shopping bags across Manhattan, into her apartment and onto her balcony. It took half an hour hosing down our harvest, and the mud clogged the drain.

We peeled off the rhizomes' outer layers, still imbued with mud, then worked the starch from the fibers with our fingers, in a large bowl of water. The water became cloudy with the starch. We waited an hour to let the starch settle, and poured off the water, getting enough sweet, tasty starch to thicken a small pot of soup—hardly worth the effort.

An alternate method is to tear apart the washed rhizomes and let them dry, pound the fibers to free the starch, and sift. This yields as about as much starch as the previous method. However, I've received reliable reports that people in other parts of the country had better results. Perhaps rhizome quality varies.

I've also tried chewing on the fibers inside the cleaned rhizomes and swallowing the starch, which is very tasty. However, the digging and cleaning is so much work, I'd have to be starving in the winter to bother. Furthermore there are reports that eating the starch of some species raw may cause vomiting.

The buds of the following year's shoots, attached to the rhizomes, are also edible. Although they make a tasty cooked vegetable, I find them too small to be worth digging up and cleaning, although their size may also vary.

Collecting the flower heads and pollen doesn't harm the plant, because cattails spread locally by their rhizomes—the seeds are for establishing new colonies, and each flower head makes thousands of these. Collecting a small fraction of the shoots also does no damage, since the colony continually regenerates new shoots. Since nobody wants to sink into the mud, people normally collect at the periphery of the stand. Of course, if the stand is small, it's already struggling to survive adverse conditions. Finding a larger stand elsewhere will increase your harvest, and give the embattled plants a chance.

The Indians also used cattails medicinally: They applied the jelly from between the young leaves to wounds, sores, boils, carbuncles, external inflammations, and boils, to soothe pain.

Besides its medicinal uses, the dried leaves were also twisted into dolls and toy animals for children, much like corn-husk dolls found today. Cattail leaves can be used to thatch roofs, weave beautiful baskets, as seating for the backs of chairs, and to make mats.

Archaeologists have excavated cattail mats over 10,000 years old from Nevada cave.

No longer edible once the pollen is gone, the brown flower heads make good "punks," supporting a slowly-burning flame, with a smoke that drives insects away. The fluffy, white seeds were once used for stuffing blankets, pillows and toys. The Indians put them inside moccasins and around cradles, for additional warmth. After hours of collecting, I once made a cattail fluff pillow, but something went wrong: My girlfriend sewed shut a pillowcase with the white seeds inside, and I went to sleep happy, on the softest pillow I ever felt. This mood quickly vanished when I awoke at 2:00 AM: My head was on top of the pillow, but my right arm had "disappeared." I discovered it beneath the pillow. It had "fallen asleep" so badly, it seemed disembodied. After I shook it awake, I wished I hadn't. There was a row of hives from one end of the arm to the other, wherever it had pressed into the pillow. They itched so badly, it seemed to require a forest of jewelweed to quell the torment. I had never heard of this reaction in any of the books that lavishly praise cattail fluff as stuffing! Confident that my "allergy" was unique, I handed the pillow to my girlfriend the next evening. She agreed that it was the best pillow ever—until the next morning, when the hives marred her once-beautiful face. She was so angry, she wouldn't talk to me until the hives healed. I learned later that my mistake had been not using thick batting material to enclose the stuffing.

Cattails and their associated microorganisms improve water and soil quality. They render organic pollution harmless, and fix atmospheric nitrogen, bringing it back into the food chain. They've even been planted along the Nile river to reduce soil salinity.

Cattail-Wild Rice Pilaf

This recipe can be made with brown rice, but the wild rice adds a special dimension to it.

- 1 cup dry wild rice (4 cups cooked)
- 2 Tbsp sesame oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped green onion
- 2 cups cattail shoots, sliced (about 30 cattails)
- 2 tsp salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup slivered almonds

1. Cook the wild rice until tender.
2. Sauté onion and cattail shoots in sesame oil until tender and translucent.
3. Mix the rice and the sautéed cattail shoots and onion together.
4. Add salt and slivered almonds.
5. Serve hot.

Cattail Wild-Rice Soup

- 1 cup dry wild rice (4 cups cooked)
- 2 Tbsp sesame oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped green onion
- 2 cups cattail shoots, sliced (about 30 cattails)
- 2 tsp salt

1. Cook the wild rice until tender.
2. In a heavy-bottomed soup pot sauté onion and cattail shoots in sesame oil until tender and translucent.
3. Add the cooked wild rice, salt and 4 cups of chicken broth or other soup stock of choice.
4. Simmer together for 15-20 minutes and serve.

Cat-on-the-Cob with Garlic Butter

30-40 cattail flowerheads, peeled

Garlic butter:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup unsalted butter
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup olive oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 12 garlic cloves, crushed

1 cup freshly chopped wild greens (or parsley or other fresh garden herbs)

Make garlic butter in a food processor by whipping the butter, oil, salt, fresh garlic and parsley together until smooth.

Note: If using salted butter, eliminate the salt from the recipe.

The olive oil makes the butter nice and creamy and spreadable, even after refrigerating. I like to make a batch of this to keep handy in the fridge. You can also make a larger batch ahead to freeze in small containers when the greens are in season.

1. Boil cattail flowerheads in water for 10 minutes
2. Make garlic butter in a food processor by whipping the butter, salt, fresh garlic and parsley together until smooth.
3. Drain the cattail flowerheads and slather them generously with the garlic butter.
4. Eat them just like miniature corn on the cobs.

Cattail Casserole

3 cups cattail flowerbuds, scraped off the "cobs" (about 40 flowerheads)

1 egg

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp nutmeg

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp black pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk

1 cup soft breadcrumbs

1 cup grated cheese

1. Cook cattail flowerheads in boiling water for 5-10 minutes.
2. Scrape the flowerbuds off the cob to make 3 cups.
3. Beat egg together with spices, milk and breadcrumbs.
4. Combine cattail flowers with the egg mixture.
5. In a greased bread pan or small casserole dish, spread half of cattail mixture on the bottom.
6. Add half of the grated cheese, spread the rest of the cattail mixture over, and top with the rest of the grated cheese.
7. Bake at 350° until lightly browned, about 30 minutes.

Cattail Flower Refrigerator Pickles

This recipe is adapted from Wildman Steve Brill's book "Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants, who got it from his friends Dean and Gabi.

Enough cattail flowerheads to tightly fill a quart jar, about 30 or 40
4 garlic cloves, peeled
1 tsp whole black peppercorns
4 to 6 bay leaves
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup apple cider vinegar (use some of your [herbal vinegar!](#))
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups olive oil
3 Tbsp salt
 $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups water

1. Boil the cattails in water for 5 to 10 minutes, and drain thoroughly.
2. Stuff flowerheads, garlic, peppercorns, and bay leaves into clean, sterile quart jar.
3. Combine vinegar, oil, water and salt in a saucepan.
4. Bring to a boil, remove from heat and pour over the cattail heads.
5. Add a little more oil, vinegar and water if the liquid does not reach to the top of the jar.
6. Cover and let marinate in the refrigerator overnight.

If you are experienced at making pickles, you could experiment with some of your favorite pickle recipes and put them up as preserves.

Cattail Pollen Pancakes

Cattail pollen pancakes are an experience you will never forget! They are absolutely delicious!

1 cup flour
1 cup cattail pollen
1 tsp salt
2 tsp baking powder
2 eggs
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup honey
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup oil
2 cups milk

1. Mix dry ingredients together in a bowl.
2. Add eggs, honey, oil and milk and mix thoroughly.
3. If the batter seems to thick to pour, add more milk until it has a good pancake batter consistency.
4. Cook on a hot griddle until golden brown.

Cattail Pollen Biscuits

You'll never be the same after eating these golden, melt-in-your-mouth

biscuits, worth every minute of your time and effort in harvesting the cattail pollen. My secret for making light biscuits is to make the dough in a food processor.

1 cup white flour (wheat flour just doesn't make 'em light enough!)

1 cup cattail pollen

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter

1 Tbsp honey or sugar

3 tsp baking powder

1 tsp salt

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk

1. Preheat oven to 450 °.

2. Put flour, cattail pollen, salt and baking powder, and butter in a food processor and run on high until you have a coarse mixture. (If no food processor, cut with a fork or pastry cutter until mixture resembles fine crumbs.)

3. Add honey or sugar plus the milk and whiz just until the dough forms a lump. Do not overmix!

4. Shape into biscuits and bake on ungreased cookie sheet 10-12 minutes until golden brown.

You can make drop biscuits by increasing the milk to 1 cup and dropping by large spoonfuls until a cookie sheet.

Buttermilk biscuits: For the ultimate biscuit, substitute buttermilk for the milk, decrease baking powder to 2 tsp, and add $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp baking soda.