

CATTAILS

Water gardens combine beauty with subtle mystery. Small wonder some Pacific Northwest gardeners will push, pull, twist and tweak every which way home landscapes in their determination to tuck a water garden in somewhere. However, when planting your water garden, don't forget the cattails! Cattails - an important source of food for wildlife, will draw ecosystems of interesting creatures into your garden. Cattails have a plant family all to themselves: Typhaceae. All are aquatic with familiar gold to brown sausage-like or cigar shaped catkins. Cattails live worldwide at temperate latitudes and in wet tropical regions. All cattails are edible.

According to Marlee Osterbauer, ethnobotany instructor for North Cascades Institute, cattails are called "Nature's Supermarket" for good reason. For millennia cattails have served Native Americans well for food, clothing, furniture, packaging, shelter and lighting. In fact they can still benefit us all now. With each season comes yet another gift from cattails.

In winter, cattail rhizomes are a good starch source. Cook like potatoes or mash, boil, and let settle to extract a pure white flour. In early spring, young cattail stalks just popping up, are called "Cossack asparagus" and can enliven stir-fries, soups or pasta dishes with a fresh cucumber or asparagus-like taste. In late spring a harvest of immature flower spikes or "kittentails", when steamed, taste like corn on the cob and can be prepared, as in the recipe below, for a tasty treat. Later in summer, pollen from the upper part of the mature flower spike packs a punch of protein and vitamins when substituted for flour in pancakes, muffins, and biscuits. In summer Native Americans dipped cigar-shaped brown catkins in animal fat to make torches. In fall, brown fluff from the cottony seed heads has served not only Native Americans, but early settlers as absorbent diaper filler for infants, feather down-like stuffing in pillows, mattresses, and quilts, and as tinder for starting fires. Ms. Osterbauer found cattail down perfect for stuffing the tail of a Tyrannosaurus rex Halloween costume! Janice Schofield in her book *Discovering Wild Plants* gives even more traditional uses for cattails.

Harvesting "kittentails" to make a delightful spring dish: Around the middle of June start looking for swelling in the uppermost parts of cattail leaves. These swellings, ensconced between the leaves like iris, are the developing flowers. Immediately below the swelling, feel a nodule where stem attaches to the flower. This should be tender enough to snap immature flower off. Peel off leaves to find two pencil-sized cylindrical shaped immature flowers: the male and female parts of the flower. The male part, a long thin spike, contains pollen in the mature cattail. You will be collecting the green immature flower that later becomes the brown velvety cigar. The recipe below calls for a dozen such little delicacies.

Recipe: Steam baby cattails for 7 minutes. Dissolve a commercial dried curry soup cube or soup powder in two cups of hot water. Starches in the cube or powder will thicken the sauce nicely. Present baby cattails in a bed of curry sauce. Like corn on the cob, though, baby cattails have a tough interior cellulose core. Discard or compost it.

Obtaining cattails: Cattails may be difficult to find in nurseries, but can be ordered on the Internet simply by typing "cattails" in your browser's search window. Four varieties of cattails are available to home gardeners. First, of course, is our familiar common cattail (*Typha latifolia*), native to the Pacific West Coast. This cattail can get to a height of 9 feet

and thus is most at home in large swampy areas. You would have to eat loads of starchy tubers to keep this one at bay in a small pond. However, dwarf cattail (*T. minima*), native to the American southeast, is ideal for tiny city pocket pond gardens. At a height of at most two feet, this cattail is engaging with its sedge-like leaves and two inch round brown catkins. *T. minima* is not invasive as *T. latifolia*, but may be slimmer pickings if you like cattail tubers. Graceful Cattail (*T. laxmannii*) is an exotic looking delight with stiff spiraling threads on the ends of its leaves and golden catkins about the size of a walnut. Narrow Leaf Cattail (*T. angustifolia*), a North American East Coast and Great Plains native, and Variegated Cattail (*T. latifolia variegata*), probably of garden origin, both resemble our common cattail except for properties implied by the names. Both graceful and narrow-leaf cattails are full sized.

Harvesting cattail products: Cattails are native plants whose habitat is disappearing. If you grow your own cattails, harvest to your heart's content. If you are gathering them in the wild, however, be mindful of rules, laws and wildcraft ethics, the latter of which are described in the Spring 2003 issue of *Douglasia, Journal of the Washington Native Plant Society*. Obtain all necessary permission on private lands and permits on public lands. Gather only what you need or will use; avoid waste. Never gather all flowers or individual plants from one area. One rule of thumb: never take even one plant or flower unless 100 or more individual plants of same species grow in the area. Collect discretely so as not to encourage others to collect indiscriminately. For your own safety, gather only from relatively clean places. Cattails growing along side a busy highway may be contaminated by road runoff and /or roadside maintenance herbicides. Be wary of collecting near industrial sites, farms, urban and suburban areas and even homes for what contaminants could get into the water where the cattails grow. Last of all, after a successful harvest from the wild, take a little time to give thanks for what nature has provided.

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