“Cattail Caterpillar at work.”

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RIO DELTA WILD

FLORA FACTS
Scientific Name: *Typha domingensis*
Common Names: Cattail, Tule
Family: Typhaceae (Cattail)

What Are Cattails Good For?

When I think about the miraculous food the Hebrews discovered as they fled away from Egypt and through the desert, I have a recurring question. Was this food some special act of divination, or did these mortals suddenly look about them and take notice of what is continually provided for us?

There are all sorts of possibilities in many of the common plants we encounter. Consider the ubiquitous cattail. When is the last time you saw anyone harvesting any part of a cattail for use?

One species of cattail was imported into Tasmania following the sinking of the Titanic. The light, fluffy seed heads were ideal for compressing into floats and other buoyancy devices such as lifebuoys. Predictably, the imported species has become a bit of a pest.

I had quite forgotten the tasty crunch of cattail shoots. They're a delight, boiled for a few minutes and served like asparagus. As a college student, I passed them growing in roadside ditches on the walk home from campus. Cattail harvesting is far more tantalizing than required reading.

Speaking of college, most of us look upon “Basket Weaving” as a waste of tuition dollars. In all fairness, one might examine this website: <www.basketmakers.org> to reconsider the notion. The information provided about cattails and their use is extensive. Basket weavers have moved up several notches in my mental notebook. Here are two bits of information the website provides:

“Cattail grows in the anoxic soil of marshes where there is little oxygen. Bulrushes (*Scirpus*), another emergent plant used in basketry, frequently grow in the same marshy area. Along water depth gradients, common cattail often grows upslope of bulrush or in open water but downslope of willow (*Salix* spp.), reed canarygrass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and common reed (*Phragmites australis*)…”

Beautiful baskets are illustrated on this website. A number of other woven products can be made from the abundant plant: “Cattail leaves and stems have been used in basketry, cordage, braiding, chair seat weaving, thatching, rope making, paper making and matting. The techniques of plaiting, twining and coiling can be used to construct cattail baskets. Cattails have been used to make matting that functions as a building material to provide shelter.”

Linked to the basket weavers' website is <2bnthewild.com>, another bountiful harvest of information: “Euell Gibbons, in his classic book *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, calls (Cattail) "Supermarket of the Swamps" and recommends the new bloom spikes (cooked as a vegetable and eaten like corn on the cob), pollen (mixed with flour), roots (peeled and processed into a flour), the heart of the still underground sprouts of the next years growth (boiled or pickled) and the white hearts of the shoots up to two feet high (eaten raw or cooked)… The fluff that bears the seeds has been used for thousands of years to stuff mattresses,

quilts and the like and is still an excellent insulation. Native Americans made an oakum-like material from the roots to seal their boats."

At South Padre Island, cattails surround two boardwalks. One leads to a pond, an excellent walk for spotting Bitterns, Gallinules, Coots, Grebes and larger fishing birds. On July 21, 2003, the cattail leaves surrounding that pond showed signs of being eaten. Fuzzy Cattail Caterpillars were visibly at work. Although the cattails must be beaten back from time to time to protect the pond's existence, they provide lots of food and shelter for abundant wildlife one predictably finds there.

Controlling cattail populations is often necessary, as they spread rapidly and can lower the level of, or eliminate, a pond. Walter Prukop of San Benito controls his cattail population by allowing his pond to dry, mowing and refilling the pond.

Mike Heep contributes this note about the need for control: "A caveat about using cattails in a home made pond that has one of those expensive liners. Some folks I know built a pond with an expensive liner. They planted a cattail in a pot and put it in the pond. It penetrated down through the liner, then started putting new shoots up through it. What a revoltin' situation that turned out to be."

Cattail marshes can be used to clean up runoff before water enters a river or lake. Because water flow is slowed by a cattail marsh, polluted sediments tend to fall out of the water column. Cattails also filter a wide range of waterborne contaminants, many of which are utilized as nutrients for growth. These same nutrients effectively lower available oxygen in streams and rivers. In addition, Cattails have been used to lower salinity in rice fields.

Mike Heep describes what an "individual" Cattail organism can entail. "If a single seed of *Typha* lands in a suitable spot in a pond, it will begin to grow. It will send out rhizomes and leaves and fill up a considerable area. That's all one individual plant. Shake off the mud and you would see it all interconnected."

Heep provides more examples of that phenomenon: "The Aspens are the same way. What looks like a groove of trees is all really one organism; they are all connected together under-ground. Same goes for a lot of Adelia, Guayacan and Coma that one encounters. There are a few other natives like that."

Cattail is the last plant included in *Native Pond and Wetland Plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*. The publication is the fourth in a series published by a local group of volunteers, the Native Plant Project. I find neither rhyme nor reason in how the plants were put into order, but the information included is quite helpful. The handbook is available currently at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco (956-969-2475) and Wild Bird Center in downtown Harlingen (956-428-2211).

There are three Cattail species along the Western Gulf Coast, *Typha domingensis, T. latifolia* and *T. angustifolia*. Each species is well-described by Charles D. Stutzenbaker in *Aquatic and Wetland Plants of the Western Gulf Coast*. This extensive reference work is a must-have for the serious student of wetland plants.

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