

Native Wild Foods

Cattails: The Forester's Friend

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

Cattails are the all-purpose plant food. Some folks call it "the outdoor pantry" and "the forester's friend". Cattails also are useful for many purposes other than food. The Boy Scouts say, "You name it, and we'll make it with cattails!"

There are three species of cattail and one hybrid: common, or wide-leaf, cattail (*Typha latifolia*), narrowleaf cattail (*T. angustifolia*), and southern cattail (*T. domingensis*), and the hybrid, a cross between wide and narrow-leaf, is *T. glauca*. Fortunately, all of them are edible, so you don't have to worry about differentiating them from each other. You just have to be sure it's not an iris or lily leaf (cattail leaves have no mid-vein, and often last year's old cattails are still evident).

All cattails like wet feet, and grow at the edges of rivers, swamps, streams, and lakes. The best ones are found growing in the mud in shallow water, because it's much easier to harvest the roots, and they'll be cleaner.

Let's start our survey of this incredible edible from the bottom up. The roots contain a flour with a high starch content, derived from the light tan, central core of the root. Preparation is tedious: the root has to be peeled, washed, smashed up in water, the flour allowed to settle, and the fibers removed. Then, a second washing with clean water, another settling and fiber removal. The Indians had a good way of doing it. They used a hollow stump and pounded the roots with a rounded stick, then washed the fibers out. When the starch settled to the bottom, they poured off the water and allowed the flour to dry. Cattail flour is excellent, adding good flavor to biscuits, pancakes, and such.



Sam Hopkins

Another part of the root that can be eaten are the small, spaghetti-like spikes that grow around the bottom on the plants. They can be eaten raw or steamed, and look like white spaghetti.

The part I like the best are new shoots, or rhizomes, that stick out of the root like a round, pointed hook about three or four inches long. This is the start of a new plant. The pure white sprout can be eaten raw, out of hand or in a salad. It tastes a bit like nut-flavored celery, and can also be boiled or baked or pickled. Dick says, "At the right time of year, if I'm on a canoe trip, you could follow my trail by the pulled-up remains of cattails with the rhizomes eaten off."

"Cossack asparagus" is the central core of the new young leaves from the base to about four or five inches up. It is cooked and eaten as a staple food in Russia, which is where it got its name. To eat, pull on the inside leaves until they break loose, then nibble from the bottom up until it's no longer tender.

Another edible part of the cattail is the green flower spike. It comes

More Nuts: I was admonished by Marie Mellinger, consultant for the *Foxfire* series of books, for forgetting to mention the hazelnut, *Corylus americana*, in the last wild foods article in *The Palmetto*. This handsome tree grows on the banks of the Apalachicola River in the Panhandle, and produces an extremely tasty nut.

Dick Deuerling

wrapped in its inner sheath, like corn on the cob. It's cooked like corn, tastes a little like corn, and is eaten like corn. Find them by feeling for the lump in the cattail spike before the brown cattail develops. Dick and Peggy, after comparing notes on their cattail eating, found that Dick ate the part of the plant that became the brown cattail, while Peggy ate the upper section that turned to yellow pollen. We're both going to try the other's cattail-on-the-cob, and recommend both parts of the blossom shaft to you. Pick them early, while both parts are still green, and peel off the wrappings. To cook them, add a little salt to some water, add the spikes, and boil them for five or six minutes. Butter them, and nibble the buds off wiry cob.

Another way to fix them is to scrape off the flowers after they've been cooked, mash them up with butter, and mix them in a casserole with other wild foods.

The upper part, when left on the plant, matures to a bright golden-colored pollen that can also be used to eat. Shake or rub the pollen off into a bag, mix it with flour, and use it to impart a beautiful golden color to pancakes, biscuits, and bread. It's also highly nutritious.

Cattails are also useful for other purposes than food. The brown cattail, when mature, goes to fluff that can be used to stuff pillows and mattresses. Back when natural material such as kapok was used for life vests and flotation devices, cattail fluff was used when kapok was not available. Brown (but not fluffy) cattails were also used as torches. Dipped in kerosene and lit, they burned for a long time.

The leaves — any species can be used, but the wide-leaf one is best — can be made into placemats, floor mats, and chair seats.

It's a diverse plant. It grows all over the U.S. and Canada, even into Greenland and the Arctic Circle. Its multiple uses for food and products make it truly the forester's friend.



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