

Common Cattails

What are they?

Cattails are wetland plants. They grow anywhere the soil is covered with water during their growing season. The common cattail, a type that has broad leaves, is one of two different kinds of this plant that grows in the Chesapeake Bay region.

What do they look like?

These tall plants can grow up to ten feet tall. Their leaves look like wide blades of grass and are about 1 – 2 inches wide. Flowers grow on top of their long stems. The female part of the flower looks something like a brown sausage. The male part looks a yellowish spike sticking out of the top of the female part. Cattail flowers grow during the summer months. The yellow spike disappears in late August. Then, in the fall, the brown head pops open, releasing fluffy seeds. Common cattails grow from underground rhizomes, or a knobby underground type of root that grows horizontally).

Where can you find them?

Common cattails grow in large groups, in any location where the land is covered by water from time to time. You can find them near the shores of ponds, lakes, rivers, and marshes and other wetland areas. They can even be found in ditches

What do they do?

Common cattails provide an important habitat and food source for a number of Chesapeake Bay animals. Many birds use the fluffy seeds they release to line their nests; still more use the densely-growing plants as nesting areas. Mallards, Canada geese, and red-winged blackbirds all love to nest in the cattails. Frogs and salamanders lay their eggs among these large plants. Muskrats and nutria use cattails to help build their nests. Other animals, such as deer, turkeys, raccoons, and waterfowl like to hide out in cattail colonies.

Special structures in the cattails' leaves allow it to make use of every bit of oxygen in the water. This makes it easier for them to exist in areas where the oxygen content in the water is low. It also helps them decompose (or rot) more easily, adding needed nutrients to the soil.

What do they eat?

Common cattails make their own food through a process called photosynthesis. In this process, plants take in carbon dioxide and water. With the help of sunlight absorbed by a green pigment called chlorophyll, they then produce oxygen and carbohydrates for their own uses, and release oxygen and water vapor into the air.

Because of this, common cattails and other plants are called primary producers. They produce their own food.

What eats them?

Muskrats, nutrias, beavers, crayfish, some fin fish, and Canada geese are some of the animals who eat cattails leaves and rhizomes.

Flora-Fact

Through the years, cattails have been useful to all kinds of animals—including man. Native peoples have used their fuzzy seeds and crushed rhizomes as a cure for burns and sores. Early colonists sometimes treated toothaches by rubbing juice from cattail stems on their teeth and gums. During World War II, the fluffy seeds the cattails produced were sometimes used to pad the seats in tanks and planes.

And, in a pinch, you can also eat parts of cattails—either raw or cooked.



Photo Source: Cal Images

