

Phragmites

What is it?

Phragmites are a kind of tall grass. Some people call them common weed. In the Chesapeake region, they are considered to be an invasive species, capable of significantly changing the Chesapeake ecosystem. Although some types of phragmites may have been growing in Maryland for a long time, the kind growing here now is not native to this area. It was introduced here in the late 1700s or early 1800s.

What does it look like?

Phragmites' stalks can be very tall—up to 16 feet in some cases. They grow in large stands, or areas where it has taken over all the available growing space. Its name comes from the Greek word for “fence”—*phragma*. Sometimes, these large stands of phragmites look like a fence.

The inch-thick stalks of phragmites are hollow inside. Their leaves are flat and taper to a long tip. These bluish-green leaves can be up to two feet long.

When these plants are young, they develop a purple seed head. These heads look like feathery tassels on the top of each stalk. As plants get older, these seed heads become white or silver. Seed heads flower from July through October.

Where can you find it?

In the Chesapeake region, phragmites can be found in both freshwater and saltwater marshes and other kinds of wetlands, and along the banks of rivers, streams, and ponds. They will also grow in many other locations where there is some water, even if it's just a tiny puddle. That's why you can find phragmites along railroad tracks and in ditches beside many roads.

What does it do?

Because they can tolerate a wide range of growing conditions, phragmites have spread rapidly in the past few years. They can live in both brackish (part fresh and part salt water) and fresh water. It doesn't matter if the soil they grow in has a lot of nutrients and is oxygen-rich or has little nutrients and is oxygen-starved. Phragmites simply grow.

Phragmites also have another advantage when it comes to surviving. They can spread by using either their seeds or their root system of knob-like rhizomes.

Because of these two habits, phragmites often take over an area, making it difficult for other native grasses and plants (such as cattails and bulrushes) to grow. The dense mats formed by phragmites' roots and rhizomes leave little room for other plants to form their own roots. In addition, these mats can actually trap sediments and change the availability of water in the area.

Phragmites grow closely together. Because of this, they can seriously reduce the amount of cover available for animals that normally take shelter in wetlands, such as deer and muskrats.

What does it eat?

Phragmites survive by creating 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, phragmites and other plants are called primary producers. They produce their own food.



Photo Source: Mary Hollinger, NOAA



What eats it?

Waterfowl such as the mallard, the Canada goose, and the wood duck all eat the seeds of this plant. Muskrats eat its rhizomes.

Flora-fact

Many new plants have been brought into this region since the colonists first settled here in 1634. However, only the ones that seriously threaten native plants and animals are considered invasive. About 15% of the plants and animals that have been introduced into Maryland are considered invasive.

To be considered an invasive species, plants or animals must (1) show an ability to reproduce rapidly, be widely distributed throughout a new area, and (2) be harmful to the environment, economy, or people of an area.

Phragmites are considered an invasive species.

