IMPORTANT HARVESTING TIP:
You are what you eat, and cattails are the water they grow in. Cattails are so effective at pulling in minerals and other compounds from their surrounding water, that they've been used in bioremediation to clean water contaminated with heavy metals and other poisonous substances. So if you're going to try harvesting cattails, make sure they're growing in CLEAN water.

SCIENCE MOM
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Cattails

A pocket-sized field guide

1

ONE GENUS, MANY NAMES

Whether you're looking at Narrow-leafed cattails, common cattails, or some hybrid between the two, these plants are some of the most useful and edible botanicals you'll ever find.

Humans have found multiple uses for every part of the cattail. They've eaten the roots, pollen, shoots, and flower stalks, and made boats, clothing, beds, paper, and rope, all from this one plant.

Cattails grow throughout the world, always in wetlands or marshy areas. Known by a variety of common names, they are all species of one genus: *Typha*.

2

IDENTIFICATION

Cattails are easy to identify when flowering. Their cylindrical flowers are unique, and look much like a sausage on a stick. While the mature plants are easy to recognize, the young shoots can be confused with poisonous members of the Iris family such as Western Blue Flag.

Cattails are an obligate wetland plant, meaning they grow exclusively in wetlands and flooded areas. They can tolerate a wide variety of climates, from tropical to temperate, but cannot survive prolonged periods of drought.

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The male or staminate flowers are first to emerge, followed soon by the female or pistilate flowers. These tiny flowers don't have petals or sepals and are packed together tightly. During late summer to autumn, the seeds are released with tufts of long hair (down). One cattail blossom can produce more than 250,000 seeds.

In the common cattail (*Typha latifolia*) the male and female flowers are joined together. In the narrow leafed cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) and southern cattail (*Typha dominguensis*), the male and female flowers are separated by a narrow portion of stem.

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AWESOME ADAPTATION
FOR GROWING IN WATER

Cattails often grow in several inches of standing water, with their roots entirely submerged in.

Plant roots need oxygen to survive, without it they die. So how do cattails grow in water that is stagnant and very low in oxygen? They build tubes of spongy tissue called aerenchyma in their leaves and stems that allow oxygen to travel to the roots.

Cattails build such an effective system of aerenchyma, that even dead brown leaves are able to transport oxygen to the roots.

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(ALMOST) ENTIRELY EDIBLE

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TREASURE OR PEST?

Whether they are a nuisance or not depends a lot on the perspective and goals of the viewer. If you are lost in the woods, finding cattails means you have water, food, shelter and a source of fuel for heat — all from one plant.

If you want to convert a swamp to arable land, cattails will do a lot to help that effort.

But if you want to keep a shallow pond open and full of water? Well, then these plants might cause you quite a headache.

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HOME FOR BIRDS and MORE

Imagine an ancient tribe of people, whether Native American, or early European, coming to the harvest the cattails for building materials, clothing, tinder, and food. The cattail continues to play an important role in our wetlands.

Take a moment to investigate the flowers, rubbing the downy fluff from last year's seeds and checking the stalks for signs of this year's growth.

The next time you walk near a marshy area, stop and look for cattails: one of the most useful and edible wild plants.

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