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CATTAILS – NATURE’S WAREHOUSE OF FOOD AND CRAFT MATERIAL

by Christopher Nyerges

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Whenever someone tells me that they aren't familiar with any wild foods, I mention a half dozen or so plants that just about everyone knows. Cattail is one of these plants which has a universal recognition. It grows worldwide in wet areas. In most parts of the United States, it is the dominant plant of roadside ditches. And cattail is not just a food. It is an incredibly versatile plant. The brown flower spikes are regarded as the quintessential element of fall dried floral arrangements, and the leaves have long been used in craft and basketry.

There are just a few species of cattail which comprise the entire cattail family, and they are so similar that non-botanists immediately know they are looking at a cattail. Sometimes these plants are called cat o-nine tails, rush, tules, and bulrush – not to be confused with the true bulrush which lacks the familiar hot-dog-on-a-stick flower spike.

These marsh-inhabiting perennials have long, erect grass-like leaves, and an overall height of about 7 to 8 feet. The flower is the cylindrical “spike” perched visibly at the top of a long sturdy stem. It consists of the female section of the flower spike – the section which appears green in the spring and then matures into the familiar brown “hot dog on a stick”. The male section of the flower is the cylindrical pollen-filled tuft on the top.

Let's begin by exploring the many foods that can be obtained from the cattail.

In the early summer, the new flowers appear as green bloom spikes (soon to be the decorative brown cattail stalk). These tender spikes make an excellent vegetable when still young and green, requiring only 10 to 20 minutes of steaming or boiling. They can also be roasted, buttered, and eaten like corn on the cob. Make sure you get these young, however. Otherwise, you'll be chewing and chewing on what seems to be a mouthful of cotton.

As these early green spikes get taller, a very fine yellow pollen forms at the very top of each flower stalk. This pollen can be easily gathered without harming the plants by shaking the heads into a bag or neckerchief. Once sifted, the pollen can be easily blended with regular flour, or can be used alone to make delicious yellow-colored bread, muffins, pancakes, etc. I have heard that some of the American Indians of the Great Basin have used this pollen as a talcum powder for babies.

Underground, the cattail forms a great network of rope-like roots (called rhizomes) that grow horizontally. Once the spongy out layer is removed, these rhizomes can be processed into a flour

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whose carbohydrate (77%), protein (8%), and fat (2%) content is comparable to corn and rice. The Iroquois Indians dried the rhizomes, pounded them and then sifted out the fiber. The resultant flour was used for bread.

The rhizomes can also be processed by a method suggested by Euell Gibbons. Fill a large container with cold water and then crush the cores by hand in the water until the fiber is separated. The flour is allowed to settle to the bottom and then the fiber can be poured off. This is repeated two to three times until the flour is free of fiber

This flour can then be used wet, or dried for later use. I have also simply chewed on the tiny white rootlets which grow from the rhizome, as well as the peeled rhizomes. These are somewhat sweet and quite tasty. Once you wash them of all their sand, you'll find that these roots are not only tasty, but they can be satisfying and refreshing during those times when you have no other food.

At the ends of the rhizomes, you'll find the very young, pointed, underground shoots (soon to develop into the long erect leaves of the young plant). These can also be eaten either raw or cooked. These are just an inch or so long, and still white. You simply snap several of them off along the rhizome, rinse them, and add to your soup or salad.

Just above the rhizome where the base of a shoot connects, there is found a sizeable lump of nutritious carbohydrate material called the "heart" or the "root" (not a root, botanically). Though they can be eaten raw, they are generally peeled, then cooked (or baked) and seasoned as you'd prepare Jerusalem artichokes, turnips, or potatoes. As the plant sends up its flower stalk, this starchy core becomes tougher and less palatable.

In the winter and spring, the young cattail shoots can be eaten. Pulling back the outer green leaves, grasp the white inner leaves of the young shoot and briskly pull it up. Approximately the bottom 12 inches of the shoots are eaten, since this is the most tender and palatable. The outer fibrous layers should be peeled back to get to the tender insides. This is probably the best food from the cattail, described by various people as tasting like celery or cucumber. To me, the flavor is closest to cucumber. These peeled shoots can be added raw to salads or eaten "as is", or can be boiled, baked, or added to stews as a "wild vegetable". These shoots are commonly referred to as "Cossack asparagus", due to the Cossacks' fondness for this food – perhaps they had little other food back then.

When I'm looking for a shoot to tug up, I always test it first. I try to gently bend the stalk at the base. If the shoot is still young and good for eating, it will bend easily. If it is older and too tough to eat, it will not bend easily.

I should add that whenever you are uncertain about the purity of the water in which you're collecting cattails, you should probably not eat the cattail parts raw. In the 20-some years I've been conducting Wild Food Outings, there was one person who experienced illness by eating a cattail shoot raw. I had advised against eating it raw due to the location in which we collected it – a roadside ditch. So please use your good judgment.

Many years ago during an interview, Euell Gibbons provided a rather memorable quote about cattails: "There is nothing I would rather do than eat my way through a roadside ditch." He was referring to the cattails, but also watercress and other common roadside ditch plants.

According to Mario Blackwolf, Gabrielino Indians in the "old days" would chew the starchy "hearts" of the cattail if they were bitten by a rattlesnake. Since this lower section of the cattail shoot is rich in sugar, it would help the rattlesnake victim deal with stress and shock.

When the fully mature brown flower spikes are broken open, all the fluffy hairs and small seeds attached to them are released. This mechanism enables the seeds to float in the wind long distances and reproduce elsewhere. This down can be pressed into wounds to stop bleeding.

In fact, the “down” from the mature brown spikes is extremely useful. Once fluffed up, it is an ideal wilderness fire tinder. Simply direct a spark into the cattail fluff, and it bursts into flame. Thousands of years ago, when people used flint and steel to make fire throughout Europe, the dried cattail down was the tinder of choice. One spark from flint and steel directed into fluffed up cattail pollen usually produces a quick flame.

During WWII, school children in the U.S. collected mature cattail spikes as well as mature milkweed pods. The down from the cattail spikes and the milkweed pods was used as a substitute for kapok which was used for life preservers, sleeping bags, etc. During the war, the primary source of kapok stuffing (a tree by the same name) was under Japanese control. Thus, alternatives to kapok were found with cattail and milkweed down, with traits only slightly inferior to goose down. You can collect the mature cattail heads, and carefully break them up (into a bag) and use the fluff to stuff pillows, stuff a sleeping bag or coat, or other insulation. Native Americans in the Northeast used cattail as an insulation for baby carriers.

Anyone who has the ability to sew can save a lot of money by making their own sleeping bags or coats. You make the main parts with nylon or cotton, and then you stuff it with cattail down. I have made a little pillow from cattail down, and I have refurbished an old sleeping bag by stuffing it with a lot of cattail down.

The long, erect leaves have long been used in making “rush” chairs, sandals, mats, and other survival and craft items. Though there are numerous books which document how to weave, here is a simple summary. First dry the long cattail leaves (to prevent later shrinkage), then moisten the leaves before weaving to make them pliable. Then, using a simple over and under weave, you can make sandals or baskets. Using a simple loom, you can weave large mats. You can sew two such mats together for an emergency sleeping bag. I slept in one of these one night, and it was certainly one or two notches better than nothing. An excellent book which provides detailed instruction on this method of weaving is Outdoor Survival Skills by Larry Dean Olsen.

Also, whenever I am near a patch of cattail, I know that my cookware will be provided. The stalks can be cut and used as chopsticks.

Cattails can be found year-round in swamp and marsh areas, and along the banks of permanent streams, ponds, rivers, irrigation ditches, etc. They are more difficult to find when the area is snowed in. Cattails grow throughout most of the world, and are common in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa.