



Cattail Harvest

(Typha spp.)

On a recent outdoor adventure with Dr. John Kallas, Director of Wild Food Adventures, I learned to harvest cattails. The cattails were located on a lake north of Portland, Oregon. To reach them, we hiked down a steep hill and then waded through water and muck up to mid-thigh. My tennis shoes sank deep into mud. Each step required a "heave-ho" to pull my feet out of their holes to continue walking.

Upon reaching the cattails, Dr. Kallas immediately went to work gently removing mud from around the underwater base of a cattail. By so doing, he located the long, starchy rhizome extending out from its base. The rhizome feels rather like a long, narrow sweet potato. Careful movement along the length of the rhizome is critical as you work to disentangle it while preparing to lift it out of the water. It is all too easy to break the rhizome off prematurely which would contaminate the exposed surface with swamp water.

After gathering up the precious harvest, we took the rhizomes to Dr. Kallas' backyard and put them in a large tub of water to keep them fresh.

Dr. Kallas taught me that the cattail is one of the most important wild foods in the world. Why does it have such status? For one thing, its habitat crosses international boundaries. It is a perennial freshwater aquatic herb found in marshes and wetlands around the globe and can grow three or more meters in height. It is an important source of food. As such, it has amazing versatility.

Most of the plant is edible. The starch in a cattail rhizome can be eaten raw. It has a pleasant taste not unlike a paste made of flour and water. This same starch can be processed into flour and used to make bread. The rhizome can be chopped up and boiled for dinner. Often extending out from the rhizome are tender young shoots. These fresh shoots can be boiled or steamed and taste similar to asparagus. Young cattail leaves—best harvested in late May to early June—can be chopped up and thrown into salads or cooked in soups.

Before cattail spikes pollinate, they can be eaten as a vegetable. When the spikes mature and yellow, pollen can be collected and used as a flavoring. One of Dr. Kallas' favorite recipes mixes 50% whole-wheat flour with 50% cattail pollen flour to produce a yellowish muffin that has a great flavor. Cattail pollen should be dried immediately after it is harvested, then refrigerated to prevent molding.



As you prepare to locate and harvest cattail, be aware that young cattail leaves can resemble iris leaves. Iris is a poisonous plant. Both cattail and iris grow "under the muck" using rhizomes. Correctly identifying cattail is critical. Also, search for cattails in ditches, lakes, or ponds located far away from pollutants of the roadside. If you make homemade cattail flour, note that it does not gluten. Consequently, baked goods made with cattail flour will not rise. Remedy this by mixing half cattail rhizome flour with half whole-wheat flour in your recipes.

Now perhaps it's time to leave your computer screen, find your tennis shoes, and go for a drive. You too can discover the beauty, utility and versatility of the cattail. It is truly a delight!

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