

Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*)



DESCRIPTION:

Though “common reed” is the ‘official’ common name, this species is most commonly referred to as “phragmites”. Although there is a native variety of phragmites, most of the aggressive colonies we see are the non-native variety imported from Eurasia. Phragmites is found worldwide, with the exception of Antarctica. It is an aggressive, perennial, warm-season grass that spreads almost exclusively by rhizomes to form large, dense colonies which exclude all other plant species. The root structure can reach up to 3 feet deep. Phragmites has detrimental ecological impacts on plant and wildlife communities. It quickly displaces native wetland species and provide little food or shelter for wildlife. Typically phragmites is found in degraded wetlands and roadside ditches and can also invade drier habitats.



IDENTIFICATION:

Phragmites is best identified by its feather-like graying purple plumes at the top of its stem. It can grow to a height of 5 to 20 ft. and has a hollow stem. Distinguishing native phragmites from the non-native strain is difficult. If the phragmites is in a dense colony void of native species it is most likely the exotic strain. Native leaves usually have a gray-green color whereas the invasive leaves are more yellow-green. Another way to distinguish between the two is to peel back the leaf from the stem. The native plant will tend to have smooth, shiny stems and a reddish color in spring and summer, whereas the exotic will be finely ribbed and dull with a tan color in spring and summer.

CONTROL METHODS:

Organic: Cutting or mowing has not been successful in eradicating phragmites, but is useful to eliminate the seeding potential. Cutting any grass at the wrong time may stimulate growth and increase stem density. Cutting at the end of the growing season or in winter can increase density. We recommend cutting phragmites as it begins to flower (e.g., before the end of July) which puts the most stress on the plants. Burning is ineffective, unless a root burn is achieved.

Chemical: When treating phragmites chemically in wetlands use aquatic approved herbicide such as glyphosate (Rodeo®, etc.), triclopyr (Garlon 3A®, etc) or imazapyr (Habitat®, etc.). Foliar spray application at 2% active ingredient (a.i.) is effective for large colonies, but it can be messy and create a lot of drift. The best time to foliar treat phragmites is after seed heads have formed and right up to frost. For smaller numbers of plants, a ‘glove of death’ method is a cleaner method. Another clean and effective method is to cut phragmites at chest level and then herbicide can be “poured” into the hollow stem. Studies show that burning the phragmites patch after foliar treatment helps in the eradication process. Always read herbicide labels carefully before use and always apply herbicide according to the product label.



NATIVE ALTERNATIVES:

In wetland areas the best replacement for exotic phragmites is a diverse mix of wetland species. Some example for wet areas (typically with standing water) try Sweet Flag (*Acorus americanus*), Common Arrowhead (*Sagittaria latifolia*), River Bulrush (*Bolboschoenus fluviatilis*), or Common Bur Reed (*Sparganium eurycarpum*). For moist soils, try Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), Obedient Plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), Cup Plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*) or Blue Vervain (*Verbena hastata*).