



The Quandary Over Cattails

(Author's Note: This is the ninth in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. For more information regarding Sanibel's unique plants and wildlife, go to the City of Sanibel's Natural Resources webpage (link below) and click on the link "2009 Environmental Reference Handbook" on the right hand side of the page.)

<http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/Natural-Resources>

Cattails are a strikingly tall, native wetland plant with a unique flowering spike that resembles the look of a cat's tail, hence the name. Even though they are attractive, filter the water, and provide habitat, many homeowners who live on a lake or a pond view them as a nuisance because of their tendency to grow in thick, impenetrable stands. They can certainly block views and you, the homeowner, may fear their ability to actually fill in the body of water. And therein lies the quandary.

Consider these pros and cons before deciding whether or not to manage cattails on your property.

Let's start with the cattail PROS:

- Cattails provide habitat for frogs, lizards, worms, insects, and small fish which are all yummy and nutritious food for our birds. The cattail communities evolve with the fluctuation in water level, therefore, are always able to provide habitat.
- Although various birds visit the cattails for food, the Common Moorhen and Grackle build nests in them, which provide the advantage of protection for their chicks before they fledge.
- Importantly, the cattails are continually filtering the lake water and storing the algae-producing nutrients in their leaves.
- The extensive root system of a stand of cattails helps stabilize your lake's bank by preventing erosion.
- Cattails growing along the bank deter alligators from basking on the shoreline.
- Cattails are strikingly attractive and a beneficial addition to your wetland landscape.

Now the cattail CONS:

- Cattails grow and spread vigorously either by breezes dispersing their fluffy seed heads or by their underground root system, called rhizomes.
- Cattails are competitively superior in stable water conditions and can ultimately crowd out other plants and grasses.
- A dense community of cattails can create drainage and silting problems by impeding the flow of water in storm water management ditches.
- Spraying chemicals in waterbodies in order to treat cattails can have direct and indirect negative effects on water quality and wildlife.
- After herbicide application, dead cattails can be unsightly and the cattail detritus (dead plant material) will release additional nutrients back into your lake or pond

So what's a property owner to do? The City's Natural Resources Department offers these recommendations:

- Choose a "no management approach" in natural water bodies or wetland areas.
- In man-made lakes and ponds, consider these non-herbicide options first:
 - Selectively trim cattail leaves back to the roots once a year, during late summer, and discard the trimmings. In doing so, you are exporting harmful nutrients that have been filtered from the water and stored in the cattail leaves. The plants will grow back and begin to take up polluting nutrients again as they leaf out.
 - Remove cattails completely by cutting the plants below the water line several times a year and dispose of the trimmings. This deprives the rhizomes of nutrients and eventually will cause the plant to die.
- If you opt to treat cattails with herbicide, leave a portion of the cattails untouched for wildlife habitat and water filtration and only treat the most problematic cattails. The remaining cattails can be sprayed by a licensed contractor with an aquatic herbicide effective on emergent plants like cattails. Be aware that over-spraying might harm other plants that you do not want eradicated or that are protected native species. Whenever possible, dead cattails should be removed from the shoreline and disposed of properly.
- Mechanical removal of cattails by a City licensed company is another option for large, dense areas of cattails. However, this method of removal can be costly and have a harmful impact on other nearby native vegetation.



Cattails (*Typha domingensis*)

Photo Credit: Ruth Brooks, Vegetation Committee Member

Before beginning any cattail management activity, be sure you understand the City's regulations, and if needed, obtain a proper permit and hire a licensed contractor.

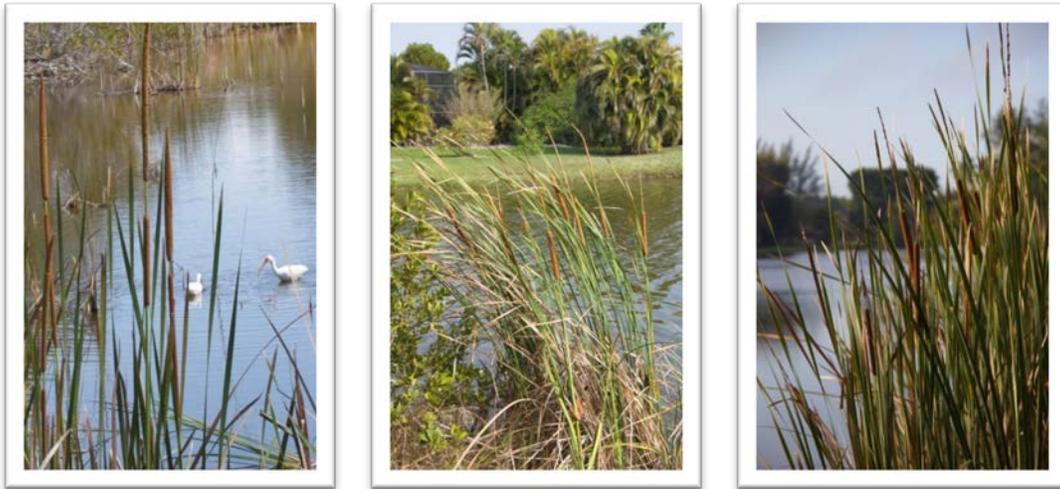
A property owner or Homeowner's Association will need to obtain a vegetation permit for the aquatic herbicide spraying of cattails. If mechanical removal is proposed a vegetation AND development permit are required.

Homeowners or landscape companies may not spray chemicals into "waterways of the state" - any body of water that connects to state waters, or into water retention ponds that were permitted by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). Only a City-licensed company with an approved permit and valid State of Florida herbicide applicators license can use chemical herbicides in these areas.

If a permit for aquatic herbicide spraying of cattails is approved, the property owner or the Homeowners Association can contact either Lee County Hyacinth Control District (LCHCD) or a City licensed lakeside management company to do the spraying. Although LCDHC will spray cattails at no charge to the property owner, the dead cattails will not be removed and nutrients stored in the detritus will be released back in the lake or pond over time. Whenever possible, property owners should have dead cattails removed from the shoreline and disposed of properly (horticultural waste). LCHCD may also request that large neighborhoods and Homeowner's Associations coordinate their requests for cattail spraying, in order to maximize efficiency of their efforts.

Keep in mind that any action to minimize cattails may allow alligators to bask on newly exposed lake banks. Property owners and contractors working at the water's edge are reminded to use extreme caution and take all necessary precautions to avoid an alligator encounter.

An active management plan is necessary for a balanced lake ecosystem that not only allows for reasonable views, but also benefits the existing wildlife and protects water quality. We hope making informed decisions on cattail management will be easier with this information in your arsenal. Happy wildlife viewing at your water's edge!



Cattails (*Typha domingensis*)

Photo Credit: Ruth Brooks, Vegetation Committee Member