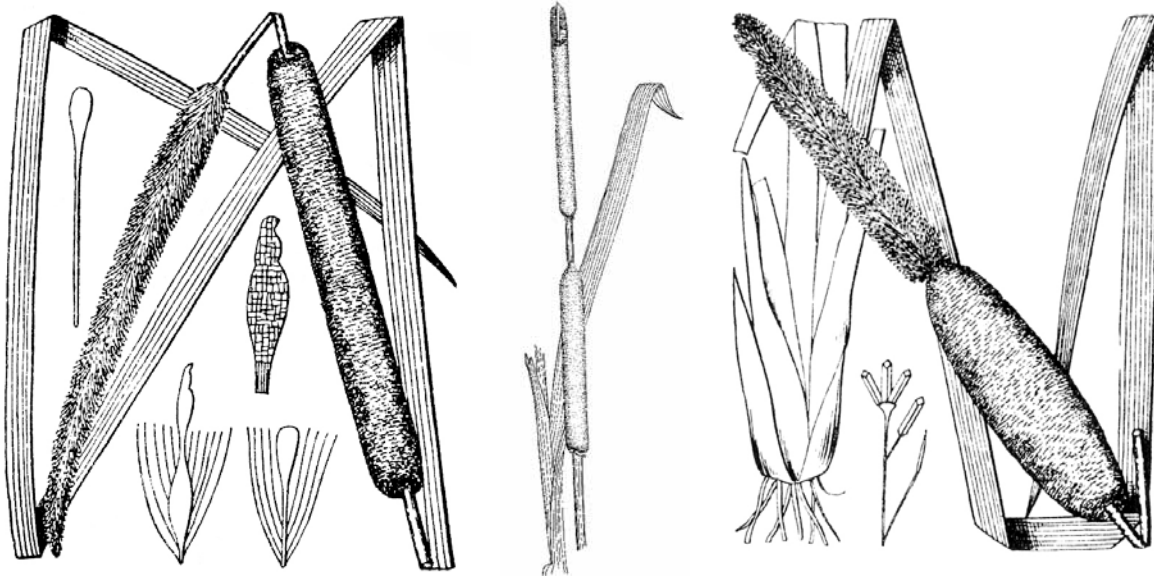

Cattails at the Jewel of the Creek

by: Patsy M. Miller, Ph.D.; Jan 2002

IS THIS GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS?



Narrow-leaved Cattail
Typha angustifolia

Southern Cattail
Typha domingensis

Broadleaf Cattail
Typha latifolia

The cattails are back at the [Jewel of the Creek](#) at the northern edge of the Town of Cave Creek bordering the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area. The question is, is that good or bad news? To answer that question one must know a little more about cattails. There are three species of cattails native to Arizona: the broad leaf cattail, *Typha latifolia*; the narrowleaf cattail, *T. angustifolia*; and the southern cattail, *T. domingensis*. The first two species are more common, while *T. domingensis* is restricted to brackish water or wet soils with a high salt content. The species probably hybridize. But for the casual visitor to the Jewel of the Creek, just knowing that the tall (up to 10 feet) grass-like plant with the brown fuzzy flower spike is a cattail is good enough.



Cattails have probably been long-time residents in wetter portions of Cave Creek, but they disappeared during the period when the area was grazed by horses. Now that the [Desert Foothills Land Trust](#) has acquired and is protecting the Jewel of the Creek, the cattails are back. Cattails like to have “wet feet” and grow best when rooted along perennial streams or lake shores. The male flowers grow above the female flowers on the flowering spike. The male flowers fall off after the pollen is shed, leaving a densely packed stalk of female flowers which can be 10 inches long. Each female flower has 40 to 60 delicate brown hairs which persist for several months and form the familiar “cat’s tail.”

The more technically inclined observer might be interested in knowing that, when growing together, *T. latifolia* and *T. angustifolia* demonstrate the principle of asymmetrical competitive exclusion. *Typha latifolia* grows in shallower waters than *T. angustifolia*. But when they are growing together, *T. latifolia* restricts the distribution of *T. angustifolia*, but *T. angustifolia* has no effect on the distribution of *T. latifolia*. The two species do not have reciprocal inhibitory effects on each other.

Cattails are perennial helophytes that reproduce by seed and rhizomes. A new colony is established by seeds and spreads by rhizomes which can be 27 inches long and an inch in diameter. Today cattails are often used in dried floral arrangements, but they were used for much more than decoration by the Native Americans. Large rhizomes were dug, cooked and ground into flour which has a nutrient value similar to wheat flour. When about one foot tall, the young shoots were pulled up and the white parts eaten raw. Spikelets of immature green flowers were boiled and eaten like corn on the cob. Baskets of yellow pollen were collected and baked into a biscuit that was naturally sweet without the addition of sugar. Cattail leaves were woven into mats and rope, and were used for roofing. The flower stalk was split and dried for basket weaving, and the brown female flowers were used as insulation in clothes.

Cattails provide a rich habitat for many species of insects, amphibians, fish, mammals, and birds. The seeds are eaten by birds and the leaves are used by muskrats for building nests. Their impenetrable stands are home to a whole community that is largely invisible to the casual visitor at Jewel of the Creek.



Cattails are also planted for wetland restoration and to mitigate the effects of water treatment plants.

The only negative aspect of cattails is that their dense stands can become a nuisance by clogging irrigation channels and permanent ponds. With their efficient vegetative propagation, they are very hard to eradicate. But since cattails are part of the natural vegetation of Cave Creek, they do not need to be removed. We are glad to see them back where they belong. When you join one of the DFLT's hikes to the Jewel of the Creek, sit quietly beside the cattails and imagine that you are a hunter/gatherer who has just come upon this wealth of food. Then look for the little critters that share this special habitat in the upper Sonoran Desert. Cattails are a very special part of our ecosystem, for all of us to enjoy.

[Editor's Note (Oct 2010): The USDA Plants Database reports *Typha angustifolia* as [not being present in Arizona](#). It is native to most of Canada, and introduced into much of the US, but not in Arizona. Similarly, SEINet (Arizona State University) reports only two specimens of *T. angustifolia* collected in recent years, but from Yavapai and Coconino counties. These facts led to inquiries of Steve Jones, local botanist who has done much work over the years for Desert Foothills Land Trust, including botanical inventory of the Jewel of the Creek area. In response to our query, his initial investigation led him to state "that *Typha domingensis* is the only local species we're likely to see at the Jewel." This was followed-up by an examination of his previous photography showing that "closeup photos of the inflorescences show the lack of a gap between the male and female flowers. That's a character of *T. latifolia*. The other photos show the customary gap between male and female flowers characteristic of *T. domingensis*." Mr. Jones also referenced the botanical description for Typha at [Flora of North America](#) which shows the complexity of the genus and it's proclivity to hybridize. Therefore, the conclusion that we draw now (2010) is that Typha is present at Jewel of the Creek as both *T. latifolia* and *T. domingensis*, and perhaps as hybrids as well. *Typha angustifolia* is unproven to be present.]

PHOTOS: by STEVE JONES at Jewel of the Creek



Typha domingensis
has gap between male and female flowers



Typha latifolia
no gap

