



The Gifts of Cattails

The following information is taken from pgs. 225-232 of Robin Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Gifts of Cattails

- Rhizomes are white and starchy on the inside and taste good roasted over fire. Soaked they become a starchy flour or porridge.
- Cattail leaves split and twisted are one of the easiest sources of plant-based cordage producing string and twine.
- Cattail gel found at the leaf base can be used to treat sunburn and itch (the cure grows near the cause).
- Long water repellent leaves packed with closed-cell foam for insulation make excellent building materials that can be used to sheath a summer wigwam. In the dry weather the leaves shrink apart letting in the breeze. In the rain they swell and the gaps close.
- Cattails make good sleeping mats. Wax keeps away moisture from the ground and the aerenchyma provide cushioning and insulation.
- White pith is edible and tastes like cucumber. It can be sauteed, boiled, or eaten fresh.
- Cattail flowers have many uses. The male half releases pollen high in protein while the female half can be boiled and eaten with butter. It tastes like artichoke.
- Cattail fluff can be used as padding ie: for pillows or bedding, insulation, and/or diapers. Word in Potawatomi is *bewiieskwinuk* meaning "we wrap the baby in it".
- Cattail stalks can be dipped in fat to make torches.
- Cattail stalks can also be used for arrow shafts or drills for creating handmade friction fires- cattail fluff can be used as tinder.
- Cattails are also soil builders. Its leaves and rhizomes return to the sediments when the cattails die back.

From Our Shared Territory:

- Late Turtle Clan Kanyen'kehá:ka Knowledge Keeper Joe Brown from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory shared with QUILLS that, in its early stages of life, while it is still husked, the seeds of cattails are eaten. Later in fall and winter the fluffy seeds are used for making fires and lining moccasins and diapers. The roots of the Cattail can also be used to make a syrupy gluten eaten with cornmeal.



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- To learn more from our shared territory you can watch a short video segment available on the QUILLS website of Mandy Wilson, a community member from Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nation, discussing the many gifts that cattails provide.
- You can also watch the following video by Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper Caleb Musgrave from Hiawatha First Nation outlining the various uses of cattails:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxKNQ6vsvRQ>