# Phragmites 101

Does this image look familiar? Views like this one can be seen in and around most of southeast Michigan. These plants, called Phragmites, grow in tightly packed stands near wetlands and marshy areas, backyards and even roadsides. It has become so common that it is easily overlooked as a normal adornment of our landscape.

Unfortunately this is not the case. *Phragmites australis* subspecies *australis* is a non-native, and more importantly, highly *invasive* wetland grass or common reed that can grow up to 15 feet tall. It crowds out native cattails and the native *Phragmites australis* subspspecies *americanaus*. According to the USDA's national agricultural library online, the invasive strain of Phragmites may have been introduced to the east coast of the U.S. as early as the nineteenth century. Now that it has had ample time to spread and thrive, getting rid of it can be very difficult.

Phragmites negatively impacts our wetland ecosystems by decreasing habitat diversity, and ultimately absorbing, or clogging up wetland areas and small streams with excessive root growth. Intact, native wetlands are highly diverse, are also an integral part of stormwater management. They improve the quality of water by acting as a filter, and help control flooding through absorption and retention. For these reasons, control and removal of invasive Phragmites is important to the health of the watershed.

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The best management of Phragmites is early management. The sooner it is identified and eradicated from an area the better. It spreads in more than one way allowing prolific growth while smothering existing vegetation creating a monoculture. Phragmites accomplishes this through seed dispersal, above ground stolons, and below ground rhizomes.

Delayed management will allow it to become very well established, rendering some methods of extermination more labor intensive driving up the cost, or not working at all. If only a few plants are present it is possible to treat them with herbicide or by digging them up before they mature.

Once established it is best to contact a contractor experienced with invasive removal, and check out your local cooperative invasive species management area (CISMA) website. A wealth of information regarding invasives, FAQ's, conferences and resources can be found there, including reporting findings on the Midwest Invasive Species Information Network (MISIN).

Check here for Macomb or St. Clair Counties:

http://www.michiganinvasives.org/lakestclaircisma/

Check here for Oakland County:

http://www.michiganinvasives.org/occisma/

As far as prevention goes the best method is to never remove native cattails. Doing so leaves an exposed area of perfect Phragmites habitat.

While the non-native version of Phragmites is more commonly observed you may still want to know the differences between the two species. Here are a few distinguishing characteristics. Native plants have a green color while non-native plants have a deeper blue-green color to their leaves. Non-natives tend to have a longer growing season, grow more densely, and have dull tan stems. Native species have red on their stems grow less densely and have a shorter growing season.

For a more detailed look at native vs. invasive Phragmites check out :

https://mnfi.anr.msu.edu/phragmites/native-or-not.cfm#leaf-persistence

https://www.greatlakesphragmites.net/phragbasics/native-vs-nonnative/

References:


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https://newsdesk.si.edu/photos/serc-native-and-introduced-phragmites