

WEED OF THE WEEK
JULY 30 2008

FEATURED SPECIES: CATTAIL

Typha latifolia

Hawai'i is known around the world for its natural beauty and has been identified as one of the planet's treasured biological "hot spots." This beauty and bounty span from mountaintop to sea in the variety of ecosystems that together make up the fabric of our archipelago. From the cinder desert of Haleakala and the coastal dunes of Mo`omomi to the Alaka`i Swamp and the ohi`a forest in the Ko`olau mountains, a web of life is tied together through intricately working microcosms, vitally dependent on one another.

Wetlands are among these important life support systems, acting as the natural filters for our watershed. Not only do they help to detoxify our land from pollutants, they contribute to our water quality and recharge our ground water supplies. Wetlands also help to regulate stream flow, providing essential flood control, and prevent the destructive forces of erosion by absorbing silt and organic material. Plus, wetlands provide critical habitat for our native plants and animals. Our endangered stilt and Koloa duck breed, nest, and feed in the wetlands, and without them, would be homeless.

In Hanalei Valley, we can see another crucial function of wetlands to us here in Hawai'i. Cultivating kalo (taro) depends upon the health of our wetland systems. Not only do our local taro farmers have to contend with the invasive apple snail, its prolific pink eggs visible from the roadside, but they also have to worry about plants taking root in the lo`i and taking over.

Today's featured weed of the week, the Cattail, is one that puts our precious wetlands and lo`i at risk. Like many of its other invasive brothers and sisters, each Cattail produces an enormous amount of seeds (250,000/flower head), which, with the help of the wind, enable it to spread from wetland to wetland. It can also spread within the lo`i or wetland by underground runners, allowing it to take over the whole system, forming dense stands. These stands are inhospitable to the endangered birds that call lo`i and wetlands their home, evicting these already struggling species.

Cattails are common on the mainland and have a very unique look to them, so they should be easy to spot. They have long, thick leaves with a brown, cigar-shaped flower head. We are still working really hard to prevent them from spreading on Kaua'i, although they have popped up in several areas. With a very rich stream and wetland network, remaining populations of stilts, Koloa ducks, moorhens, and coots, and the state's largest taro industry, Kaua'i has a lot worth protecting when it comes to our lo`i and wetlands.

If you see Cattails in your yard or elsewhere on the Garden Isle, please call 643-PEST (7378). Our wetlands, each an irreplaceable piece of our island ecosystem, are counting on it.

INDIGENOUS GARDEN ALTERNATIVE: Don't let cattails take over your water garden! Try planting one of Hawai'i's native wetland species, like Kohekohe, which is a rush, just like Cattail. Check out Rick Barboza's article about it in the Star Bulletin at <http://starbulletin.com/2004/09/03/features/garden.html>.