

Harvesting Cattail Shoots

It is spring in the northern hemisphere and in many areas new green growth is sprouting all over the landscape. This means a rich early harvest for the astute survival enthusiast, as many of your local plants are at their most tender and delicious stages.

Cattails Are a Great Survival Plant

One of the best plants in terms of usefulness to the survivor is the common cattail. Easily identified and widespread, the cattail is a survival plant bar none. From survival food and shelter, to blankets and even clothing, the common cattail is your friend when the going gets tough – or you just want a quick handy snack.

This afternoon I went to the swamp in back of the house and took a look at the freely maintained garden that nature is growing there. As you can see in the first clickable picture, the swamp still contains the dry remains of last year's cattail plants rising six or eight feet out of the mud.

Harvesting Spring Cattails



Early spring cattail shoots emerge from the mud of a swamp among last year's dry cattails. Cattails are an excellent survival plant. They can be used in the construction of shelter, fire, and clothing. Many parts of the plant are used as survival food.

The dry stalks, leaves, and tops of the old cattails have their uses but today I was more interested in the fresh crop of sprouts reaching for the sky. At this time of the year the green cattail shoots are just poking out of the mud, some have gotten as high as a foot or so and are in prime condition for harvest.

Harvesting cattail shoots for food is easy. Simply grasp the shoot at its base, as close to the root as possible. You may have to press your hand into the mud an inch or so in order to do this. Then gently pull upward until the cattail shoot breaks off. You should be able to gather a large pile of shoots in no time at all.

Preparing Cattail Shoots

A pile of fresh cattail sprouts. Easy to gather, you can often pick a basketful of these tasty plants in less than 15-minutes.

As you can see in the next picture, you should peel your cattail shoots because the outer layers are tough. Ribbed with air chambers, these layers of the cattail allow it to float. They are very easy to peel

off using your fingers alone. Be sure to keep the lower portion of the green leaves as they are especially tender and tasty.

And there you have it. In just a few minutes you will have a large handful of delicious and nutritious food, fit for any survivor.

Before eating, make sure to wash your cattail sprouts in clean water that has been treated to remove parasites and other nasty creatures. Your swamp may very well be harboring such intestinal pests as giardia. If you do not have clean water available, you can boil your cattail shoots for a short while in order to be on the safe side.

Cattail shoots can be gathered in large quantities and pickled, frozen, or canned.

The Edible Cattail

I liken the taste of cattail shoots to that of the cucumbers. They are fine food eaten raw, boiled, steamed, or in salads. I have not found nutritional information on cattail shoots but it seems they would contain a host of vitamins, minerals, and starch for the food energy you need to survive.

Harvesting food like the cattail from nature's storehouse is smart. It is food you do not have to expend energy in growing, carrying with you, or keeping fresh. These survival food freebees can give you the edge in any wilderness survival situation.



It is very easy to peel cattail shoots using only your fingers. The outer peel is composed of tough air chambers that are designed to allow the cattail to float but make the fiberous and inedible.

The inner portion of the cattail shoot is what you want. Note I have also kept a portion of the lower cattail leaves. I find these leaves to be especially tender and tasty.