



The Seas of *Phragmites*

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When it comes to dramatic, towering, ornamental statements, the landscape plant of choice would seem to be something called *Phragmites australis*. With its stately stalks adorned with massive tufts of showy fluff—and its ability to grow in poor, damp soils almost anywhere—*Phragmites* (pronounced frag-mite-eez), originally showed potential to become a plant of choice for recovering wetlands in Illinois.

And so it was planted years ago on old mine properties and other semi-barren shorelines to establish vegetation and stabilize soils. Meanwhile, landscapers everywhere were delighted to introduce these 7-foot-tall statements to their yards. Unfortunately, when *Phragmites* populations began spreading into adjoining wetlands and lakes, its ability to exceed original expectations soon became apparent. Today, vast wetlands, including formerly healthy wetland plant communities, have become dense, monocultural seas of solid *Phragmites*. Worse yet, once popula-

Introduced for its ground-covering properties and ornamental allure, the exotic, invasive nightmare known as *Phragmites australis* needs no further introduction.

tions become established, there seems to be no quick fix to halt the invasion. Its roots spread underground like wildfire, colonizing and out-competing any native plant along the way.

In fact, eradication is so difficult—and the plant has become so well-established—land managers now merely hope to suppress the smothering expansion of this now-dreaded plant.

“It’s just not practical to try to eradicate *Phragmites* from large lakes such as Rend Lake,” reported DNR fisheries biologist Mike Hooe, who’s seen entire bays of shallow lakes turn into seas of phragmites. Similar to native cattails—a favorite food of muskrats—*Phragmites* can dominate a wetland, but without the wildlife benefits. The seeds have negligible attraction to wildlife, and the entire plant, while showy and interest-

ing, basically takes up space where native plants once lived.

Attempts to control *Phragmites* include repeated burning of affected areas, followed by mechanical disturbance to the soil (to rip apart the roots, which spread new colonies) and the use of selective, water-approved herbicides. It takes aggressive, focused assaults on specific populations to hold back the advance of this wetland-dominating invasive.

“Realistically, total eradication is not going to be the goal where massive populations are already established,” explained River-to-River Cooperative Weed Management Area Coordinator Chris Evans. “We’re focusing on priority areas, trying to control *Phragmites* before it gets established.” He said control efforts focus on education as much as anything else.

He urges all: Do not be tempted by the ornamental allure of *Phragmites australis*. And don’t be afraid to ask your local garden center if the water-garden plants they’re offering are native, non-invasive species.

Just because *Phragmites* makes a dominating landscaping statement doesn’t mean it has to dominate yours.

