

New York City EcoFlora



Phragmites australis (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud. subsp. ***australis***

Common Reed, Old World Reed Grass, Phrag

Description: Robust herb, 2–3 m tall; colonial from durable rhizomes; stems erect or decumbent, under leaf sheaths mostly green, ridged and dull textured; leaves olive green, flat, leathery, 15–60 × 2–4 cm wide, the sheaths persistent; ligule < 1 mm long; inflorescences ovoid, brown, 20–40 cm long and about 20 cm wide; spikelets 3–7 flowered, the first glumes < 4 mm long, the second glumes < 6 mm long, hairs of the rachilla exceeding the florets.

Where Found: Subsp. *australis* is native to Eurasia; now present across most of North America; disturbed brackish and fresh water wetlands, industrial sites and roadsides, salt tolerant and largely shade intolerant; seed set is low and spread of the species is primarily by movement of contaminated soil; throughout New York City, especially in degraded marshes. Common Reed is a New York State Prohibited species under [Regulation Part 575](#).

Natural History: The subspecies *australis* is very aggressive in disturbed sites and forms extensive monospecific stands (e.g. New Jersey Meadowlands). Estuaries and marshes are some of the most productive ecosystems on earth and their transformation to monocultural stands of one non-native species degrades their dynamic structure and diversity. Some of the many native, estuary plants displaced by Common Reed include Wild Rice (*Zizania aquatica*), Cord grasses (*Spartina* spp.), Marsh Elder (*Iva frutescens*), Groundsel Tree (*Baccharis halimifolia*), Spatterdock (*Nuphar* spp.), Pickerelweed or Tuckahoe (*Pontederia cordata*), Arrowleaf (*Peltandra virginica*) and Seaside Lavender (*Limonium carolinianum*).

Cultural History: The Common Reed was introduced to the northeastern US in the 18th or 19th century. Plants spread by seed and by rhizomes and rhizome fragments transported with soil and machinery. Eradication becomes more difficult as the populations become more established. Large, dense monocultures prevent water access for wildlife and humans, destroys waterfront views, prevents recreations such as boating, fishing, swimming, hiking and nature study.

Name Notes: The genus name is derived from the Greek word for hedges, *phragma*. The epithet *australis* means southern.

Species Notes: This cosmopolitan species may be divided into two or more subspecific taxa. The North American form of the species (subsp. *americanus* Saltonst., P. M. Peterson & Soreng) can be distinguished by the deciduous leaf sheaths revealing shiny, smooth, maroon stems (culms); ligules > 1 mm long; and longer glumes (first glume > 4 mm long, second glume > 6 mm long). The native plants do not form large, monospecific stands. Only recently recognized as distinct from the Old World form, its distribution in North America (and New York City) is still not well-known.

Links: iNaturalist [observations](#) from New York City. [Specimens](#) from the Mid-Atlantic Herbaria Consortium. Global biotic [interactions](#) from GloBI.