

# Invasive Alien Plant Species of Virginia

## Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*)

### Description

Common reed is a tall perennial wetland grass ranging in height from three to thirteen feet. Strong leathery horizontal shoots, called rhizomes, growing on or beneath the ground surface give rise to roots and tough vertical stalks. These stalks support broad sheath-type leaves that are one-half to two inches wide near the base, tapering to a point at the ends. The foliage is gray-green during the growing season, with purple-brown plumes appearing by late June. The plant turns tan in the fall and most leaves drop off, leaving only the plume-topped shoot. Big cordgrass (*Spartina cynosuroides*), a non-invasive species, is sometimes confused with common reed. It can be distinguished from common reed by its sparse flowering structure and long narrow leaves.

### Habitat

Common reed thrives in sunny wetland habitats. It grows along drier borders and elevated areas of brackish and freshwater marshes and along riverbanks and lakeshores. The species is particularly prevalent in disturbed or polluted soils found along roadsides, ditches and dredged areas.

### Distribution

Found throughout the temperate regions of North America, common reed is widespread in eastern Virginia and also can be found in some western areas of the state. It is

strongly suspected that a non-native, aggressive strain of the species was carried to North America in the early 20th century.

### Life History

Common reed spreads to a new area by sprouting from a rhizome fragment or from seed. New upright stems grow from the rhizome each spring. Rhizomes spread horizontally in all directions during the growing season. Flowering begins in late June, and seeds are formed by August. In early autumn, food reserves move from leaves and stems to the rhizome system. The leaves die and fall off, with only the dead brown vertical shoots remaining. The accumulation of dead leaves and stems, as well as the pervasive rhizome system, prohibits the growth of desirable plant species.

### Threats

Common reed has become a destructive weed in Virginia, quickly displacing desirable plant species such as wild rice, cattails, and native wetland orchids. Invasive stands of common reed eliminate diverse wetland plant communities, and provide little food or shelter for wildlife.

### Prevention

Minimizing land disturbances and water pollution helps deter this invasive species. Land management practices that guard against erosion, sedimentation, fluctuating water

levels and nutrient loading in wetlands are the best long-term protection.

### Control

Once established, common reed is very difficult to completely eradicate.

However, careful planning and long-term management can yield varying levels of control. Herbicide use in combination with burning has generally proven to be the most effective means of control, and results in minimal disturbance to wetlands. Only a biodegradable herbicide that is licensed for use in wetlands and non-toxic to animals can be used. Because a healthy wetland ecosystem is generally resistant to invasive species, long-term control of common reed depends upon restoration of the health of the ecosystem.

For more information on native plant conservation, contact the Virginia Native Plant Society at the address below. For information on Virginia's natural areas and natural heritage resources, contact the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage (see address below).

For more information, contact the Department of Conservation and Recreation or the Virginia Native Plant Society.



Department of Conservation & Recreation  
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