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Controlling invasive Phragmites on shoreline properties

What is invasive Phragmites? Phragmites australis subspecies australis (also known as the European common reed) is an invasive grass that grows into dense monocultures that can grow as high as 5 m. Stands of Phragmites severely impair wetlands, threaten biodiversity, reduce habitat, damage municipal and private property, and impede access to recreational activities.

How can I distinguish the native plant from the invasive? There are differences between the two; some that require experts or having the different plants side by side, which is rare. To find out more about identification and see more pictures, please visit GBF.org or this url: http://bit.ly/IDphrag

One of the more obvious differences is seen at the base of the stalks in mature stands. Native Phragmites tend to have a red colour, and be smooth. The plants in a native stand are often more scattered. Mature stands of invasive Phragmites are very dense, and the base of the stalks is beige in colour and feels a little rough.

Native Phragmites: Red shiny at base

Non-native Invasive Phragmites: Tan, dull at base

What can I do on my shoreline?

You cannot apply herbicides. Use a manual cut process where only invasive Phragmites stalks are removed. Tools and resources needed depend on the size of the stand, and you need to plan accordingly. There are instructions and recommended tools for large and small stands at GBF.org or url http://bit.ly/shorelineprocess. Find a short summary of the process on the next page.

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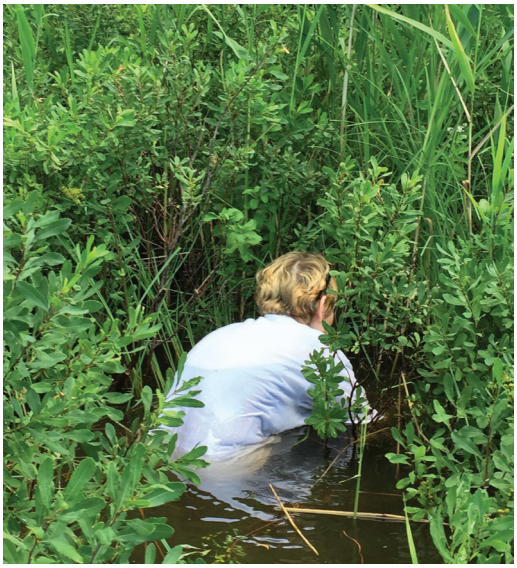
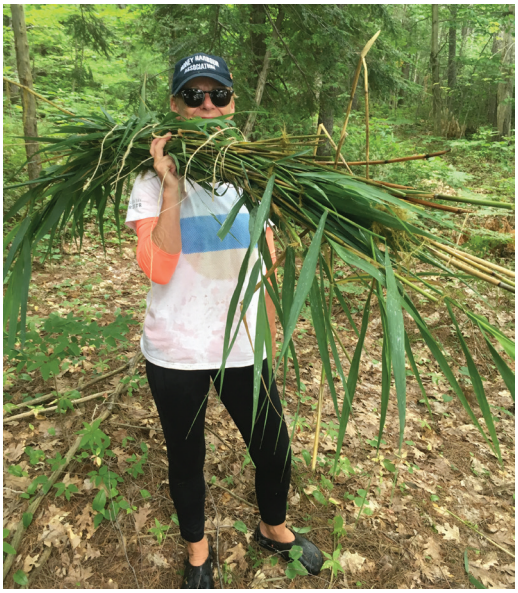
(Summary of process continued)

Most stands are small enough to manage with some volunteers and hand cutters. Here is an outline:



Note that this volunteer is only cutting Phragmites in this mixed wetland. Leave other plants and bushes alone. Reach below the surface as close to the sediment as safely possible to cut the stalk.



Kathryn Davis twining stalks of cut invasive Phragmites.

1. Gather the equipment: hand held cutters, natural twine, scissors, heavy soled shoes that can go in the water, gardening gloves, eye protection, a hat, appropriate clothes that can get wet and protect from elements, PFD, some yard waste bags, and friends to help as needed.

2. How to remove invasive Phragmites and timing:

   - The timing to remove the stalks is between mid-July and mid-August before seed heads emerge.
   - Cutting: Review safety tips here: http://bit.ly/safetyphrag. If there are seed heads, remove them first and put the heads into yard waste bags to be burned in a burn barrel. To start on the stalks, begin on the outside and work inwards. Cut each stalk underwater as close as safely possible to the sediment level (not just below the surface). You are only removing the stalks and attached leaves - do not try to disturb the roots – they are extensive, and uprooting them will contribute to the spread. Keep watch for floating pieces of Phragmites and gather them up as best you can to prevent spread.
   - Disposal: Do not leave stalks and debris in or near the water. On your property, find a designated spot where cut stalks can decay (best with sunlight). Wrap 20-40 stalks piled end to end in natural twine to prevent them from blowing away. Check the site next year to ensure that nothing has sprouted. It is unlikely, but it is very critical to monitor these sites, and dispatch anything that may grow.
   - Follow-up: This is a 2-5 year annual process depending on the size of the stand. Each year the Phragmites stand will come back much diminished. Keep vigilant about the site, and the disposal site. The process works, and you will be rewarded with native plants returning and habitat being restored.

Where can I get more help or ask questions?

There may already be a volunteer Phrag community champion in your area to help you. Please contact either Georgian Bay Forever at gbf.org, the Georgian Bay Association at georgianbay.ca, the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve at gbbr.ca, or the Georgian Bay Land Trust at gblt.org to find further assistance.