

Phragmites Revisited

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Introduction *Phragmites australis* was featured in the [2014 September Weed Post](#) and this post revisits the species to provide additional identification information and an update on its status in Montana. Two lineages of *P. australis* occur in Montana – one native (sub-species (ssp.) *americanus*) and one introduced and invasive (ssp. *australis*). Native and introduced *Phragmites* habitats overlap and include wetlands (both freshwater and brackish), along lakes, streams, and rivers, and near springs. Invasive *Phragmites* may be more likely to occur in disturbed sites like roadsides and railways, construction sites, and near agricultural fields.

Status in Montana The first populations of *Phragmites* were found in Hill and Blaine Counties in 2014. At that time, *Phragmites* was under review for listing as a noxious weed and was subsequently added to the statewide list in 2015. Since then, the populations in those counties have been managed with fire and herbicide and have decreased from about 4 acres to 0.2 acre (~200 stems). In more recent years additional populations have been found in the following counties: Missoula (2020), Gallatin (2023, 2025), Lincoln (2025), and Flathead (2025, 3 populations). These infestations have been or will be managed and are being monitored annually for regrowth and retreatment.

Identification Distinguishing between native and invasive *Phragmites* is difficult, and multiple traits should be considered. The [September Weed Post from 2014](#) includes a table that lists key features to examine to differentiate between native and invasive *Phragmites*. This post focuses on comparisons of leaf sheaths and inflorescences of the native and invasive sub-species. The leaf sheath on native *Phragmites* is loose and tends to fall away from the stem while those on invasive *Phragmites* adhere tightly to the stem (photo: top). Once the leaf sheath falls away, the stem may turn a reddish color, therefore stems on the native are inclined to be redder than the invasive. The stem is smooth on the native while it is ridged on the invasive, but this is most easily noted by touching versus looking at the stem. The leaves of native *Phragmites* are generally light, yellow-green while those on the invasive are dark green (photo: bottom, left). Inflorescences of the invasive are denser than the native and may be a different color (photo: bottom, right). Colors of leaves and inflorescences change over the course of a growing season. Differentiating between the native and invasive is easiest after mid-summer and into winter.



Leaf sheaths and stem of native (left) and invasive (right) *Phragmites*.
Photo: Jane Mangold, MSU.



Leaves of native (left) and invasive (right) *Phragmites*.
Photo: Jane Mangold, MSU.



Inflorescences of native (left) and invasive (right) *Phragmites*.
Photo: Jane Mangold, MSU.

Additional photos and descriptions can be found in the MSU Extension publication [“Watch Out for Phragmites”](#) and [“Identifying and Reporting Invasive Phragmites”](#) from the University of Minnesota.