Phragmites australis (A.J. Cavanilles) C.B. von Trinius ex E.G. von Steudel

Common Reed

(Arundo altissima, Arundo australis, Arundo phragmites, Arundo vulgaris, Phragmites altissima,
Phragmites communis, Phragmites longivalvis, Phragmites maximus, Phragmites phragmites, Phragmites vulgaris)

- Phragmites australis is native to large portions of the globe, both in the New World and Old World where it is variously known as Carrizo Común, Ditch Reed, Giant Reed, Phragmites, or Reed Grass; the species type Phragmites australis subsp. australis (Common Reed, European Common Reed) is considered to be a noxious weed and can be invasive in much of North America, whereas the native North American genotypes are much less aggressive in most ecosystems; Phragmites australis (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud. subsp. americanus K. Saltonstall, P.M. Peterson and R. Soreng (North American Common Reed, North American Reed Grass) is native to much of North America, including extreme North Texas, whereas Phragmites australis (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud. subsp. berlandieri K. Saltonstall & D. Hauber (Phragmites australis var. berlandieri, Gulf Coast Common Reed, Gulf Coast Reed Grass) is native to Mexico and perhaps to the southern half of Texas, and the Gulf Coast throughout most of Florida; the genus name is derived from the Greek word phragma meaning fence or hedge while the specific epithet means southern; the subspecies names americanus means from America and berlandieri honors J.L. Berlandier, a botanist from Belgium who was an early European plant explorer in Texas and New Mexico.

- Common Reed is an 8’ to 12’ tall colony forming cane type grass which spreads both sexually via seed and vegetatively from rhizomes or stolons; it is typically found in wetlands, either fresh water or brackish; growth of vegetative stands is quick; the gray-green to bluish green leaves which are mostly produced in a single plane are ½” to 2” wide and up to 24” long, rolled in the bud, hairless above, hairless to lightly hairy beneath, and have rough margins; inflorescences are 6” to 20” long terminal panicles which begin densely packed, resembling those of Arundo donax, but then become more open and often develop a one-sided windswept appearance at maturity, particularly in exposed locations; inflorescences vary in color from nearly white, cream, red-purple, to nearly black within the species and occur from mid-summer to early fall depending upon the location; the species type is hardy in USDA zones 3 to 11.

- According to Swearingen and Saltonstall (2010) the best way to distinguish the subspecies are via genetic tests, but there are some distinguishing morphological characteristics, particularly when comparing P. australis subsp. americanus and P. australis subsp. australis; the native North American genotypes are reported to have less dense stands, many leaf sheaths are shed by the time flowering occurs, leaves are a lighter yellow-green color, stems have more exposed reddish culms, inflorescences are even sparser than the species type and may be lost in winter, and ligule, upper glume, and lower glume lengths are greater than those in the species type; also small black fungal spots are more common on the native genotypes than the species type; Phragmites australis subsp. berlandieri is reported to be much more difficult to separate morphologically from the species type on a reliable basis.

- Closely related grasses include the notorious Arundo donax which is very similar to P. australis, but is an even coarser textured giant grass with larger leaves and denser, often larger plume-like inflorescences; Phragmites was at one time included in the genus Arundo; while the species type of P. australis originating from the Eastern Hemisphere may pose a similar problem as A. donax to native ecosystems, the native subspecies might represent acceptable noninvasive substitutes for these problem genotypes when a large colony forming grass is desired for ornamental or remediation purposes plantings on large wetland sites.

- Variegated cultivars of the species type are reportedly less vigorous, about half the size of the species type, less cold hardy (only to USDA zone 4), and fairly well behaved on typical garden soils, but caution should be exercised as they may be more aggressive in wet locations and as with most other species variegated cultivars may revert to the species type which might lead to unwanted consequences, so caution is advised; ‘Variegatus’ has dark green and yellow strips, ‘Striatopictus’ cream and green stripes, and ‘Candy Stripe’ mint green, white, and pink striping; ‘Candy Stripe’ may actually be a cultivar of the closely related Southeast Asian / Australian species Phragmites karka (A.J. Retzias) C.B. von Trinius ex E.G. von Steudel.

- Phragmites australis (A.J. Cavanilles) C.B. von Trinius ex E.G. von Steudel subsp. altissimus (G. Bentham) W.D. Clayton (Giant Common Reed, Giant Reed Grass) is even larger and coarser textured than the species type, with heights reported as tall as 18’; this subspecies is sometimes marketed under the cultivar name of ‘Pseudodonax’; the subspecies name altissimus means very tall.