Trustee Matters

PHRAGMITES

Ever notice the tall fluffy brown grass like plants that grow along our wetlands? Many folks like to cut them and use them in vases as decorative pieces in their homes. Well this plant, known as Phragmites or Common Reed Grass, is actually an invasive plant species here in America. Since the plant is an indicator of wetlands, however, whether fresh or marine, it falls under regulation by the NYSDEC and the Trustees.

Phragmites is an invasive plant that was introduced to the east coast of the United States over a hundred of years ago, most likely on trade ships from Europe. It grows everywhere, in wetlands, along road sides, and in any disturbed area. With distinctive plumy or feathery flower clusters, 6”-12” in length, they turn from reddish to silver to brown/ tan in color and can distribute a tremendous amount of seed in the wind. The plants possess a rhizome structure which sends out long, horizontal runners, sprouting new plants, and thus can spread rapidly. It is found along the upper edges of marshes, especially where there has been disturbance. This dense reed grass is especially fond of replacing Spartina grass, also known as Cord Grass, which is the very important natural green grass you normally see growing in the intertidal zone along our creeks shorelines.

If you have Phragmites growing in your yard and you want to trim it, you have to obtain a permit from the Trustees. This permit will be good for 10 years. As of this writing, current NYS law allows the plant to be trimmed to 12” in height but not mowed to the ground. Trimming will help eradicate the plant by encouraging other native plants to take root and grow and by not allowing the Phragmite to bloom to seed.

On occasion, the Trustees, Cornell Cooperative Extension or other organizations along the East Coast, conduct wetland restoration projects where Phragmite is removed and more valuable plants introduced. Locally, Marion Lake in East Marion, is undergoing such a restoration project. Once overcome with Phragmites that was choking the life out of the lake, the restoration project (initiated by the neighbors around the lake) has helped re-capture many acres of what was once pristine wetland.