

Lake Lingo For Weed Watchers

By Kelly Somerlot, Watershed Educator, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County

Lake weeds can be annoying and even harmful to swimmers, boaters, and aquatic communities. But what makes a plant turn into a troublesome weed? The fact is that most aquatic plants are beneficial and are critical to healthy lakes. Plants release oxygen into the water, provide needed habitat and food to fish populations, and stabilize lake bottom sediments to reduce water turbidity. In order to recognize a “weed” from the average beneficial plant it helps to understand a number of terms that are often used to describe them.

“Native” plants are the varieties that have historically existed in a given location. Plants that are considered to be “exotic” or “nonindigenous” are varieties that are not native to an area, but that were translocated or introduced to a location where they were not historically found. Many exotic species do not provide the benefits that native plants do; the exotics are often too unfamiliar to the varieties of fish and other aquatic animals that we have in New York. At the same time, the populations of native plants that our fish and aquatic animals do depend on may decrease because of the added competition with the invasive plant! Just as humans inherit immunity to local germs or conditions (consider the diseases that Europeans introduced to Native American populations, the effect of “thin-air” on visitors of high mountain elevations, or the inability of tourists to drink foreign water), plants and animals that come from the same location and have lived together over many generations have adapted to life with each other. When an unfamiliar plant or animal is introduced to a new location, that co-adaptation relationship does not exist. Some introduced species become what is considered “invasive” because they have an advantage over the native plants or animals; they may lack predators or disease in their new surroundings, they may be able to grow larger, reproduce faster, out-compete native species, or they may introduce a disease that the native population has not built a tolerance for.

While not all exotic species are invasive, many of the problematic plants considered “weeds” are non-indigenous. Eurasian watermilofoil is one example of an invasive, exotic aquatic plant that is native to Europe but now found in Skaneateles and Otisco Lakes. Eurasian watermilfoil, as many local lake users know, exemplifies the term weed. Since first introduced into the U.S. it has spread from lake to lake, invading aquatic communities, clogging water bodies, and over-taking native plants. Many local waterways are also dealing with other aquatic invasive weeds, including water chestnut – which has made its way to Oneida Lake and the Seneca River. The best remedy for nuisance plants is to prevent their introduction and establishment into new areas. “Weeds Watch Out! Stop the Spread of Invasive Aquatic Plants” is a program that challenges local lake users and homeowners to be weed-wise. Participants will learn to identify exotic weeds from beneficial native plants and help keep an eye out for new infestations. For more information on aquatic plants or the “Weeds Watch Out” program, contact Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County (315) 424-9485 or visit www.co.cayuga.ny.us/wqma/weedswatchout.