

Aquatic Weeds in Lake Gaston - Part I

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Editor

This is the first of a four-part series on aquatic weeds in Lake Gaston.

Although much of this information has been previously published, it has been the experience of all organizations involved in the weed enigma that there can never be too much education on the subject.

Because of the somewhat transient nature of much of our area, i.e. new property owners, part time to full time, etc., many will not have been exposed to this information previously.

There is also the very high likelihood that those property owners who live on deeper water, say 20 feet or so, are experiencing or are about to experience hydrilla for the first time, as the weed proves it can grow in deeper water.

This series will chronicle the invasion and growth of non-native noxious weeds, the attempts to control them, and will end with plans to control them in the future. The reader should understand that once established, as they are in Lake Gaston, they cannot be eradicated, only controlled.

Before we review the history of these weeds, however, it is important to have a primer on what these unwanted plants are.

Hydrilla is the primary problem weed in our lake. It was first discovered in the U.S. in 1960 at two Florida locations. From then until 1995, it has spread to 40,000 acres of water in 43 percent of Florida public lakes. Since that time, it has been found in all Gulf Coast states, and Atlantic Coast states as far north as Maryland and Delaware, and in the western states of California, Washington, and Arizona.

Originating in Europe, the weed grows as far north in Poland and Russia as nearly the 50 degree north latitude, or about even with the U.S./Canadian border.

Although no one is sure how it got here, speculation is that its use as an aquarium plant may explain its arrival and introduction initially. Since then, it has most likely been spread unknowingly from lake to lake by boaters and anglers.

While hydrilla may be the most prolific non-native exotic aquatic weed in Lake Gaston, it certainly isn't the only one. Others pictured above, include Brazilian elodea, Eurasian watermilfoil, and brittle naiad. Although hydrilla is the most immediate problem, these others are taking a firm hold, primarily in the western portions of our lake.

As many lake residents are painfully aware, hydrilla presents several problems to property owners and lake users.

First and foremost, it restricts the use and enjoyment of many areas of the lake. Left untreated, it can sock in boat docks and swimming areas, making the water it occupies useless for most recreational activities.

Secondly, it competes effectively with fish fry and small species of fish for nutrients in the water that these fish rely on for food.

Lastly, unlike many beneficial native plants, it reduces available oxygen in the water.

Although initial research led experts to believe hydrilla would only grow effectively in up to 10 feet of water, the plant has recently been found to be growing in depths up to 20 feet.

As of the fall 2003 survey, hydrilla infests about 3,500 acres of Lake Gaston shoreline.

Part II next week will begin to outline the history of weeds and their spread in Lake Gaston.