

Aquatic Plants in the Bolton Lakes

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Plants growing in fresh water are natural and mostly good. They provide protection for small fish and microscopic animals called zooplankton. They help hold the bottom sediment in place. And some, like water lilies, are beautiful. To grow they need water, light, and food. They have plenty of water, the bottom sediment is rich in plant nutrients, and when the lake water is clear they get good light. In other words, fresh water lakes will naturally have aquatic plants.

However, some aquatic plants will grow and spread out of control. When this happens they seriously degrade and even destroy the usefulness and beauty of a lake. We need to be on constant watch for these plants. We must make sure we do nothing to encourage their growth. The Bolton Lakes have a history of such evil plant invasions.

The first simple rule to remember is that the same stuff that makes your lawn and garden green will make your lake green too. Whether it comes from a chemical factory or a barnyard, fertilizer that gets into the lake makes more plants grow. Most algae are microscopic plants called phytoplankton. Some algae, the most dangerous, are actually bacteria. This algae is called cyanobacteria, and it feeds on the same nutrients, mostly phosphorus, that all the other aquatic plants do. There is already more than enough plant food in our lakes' sediment. It is our responsibility to see that no more plant food gets into the water.

Many aquatic plants are very similar in appearance making it hard to tell the good from the bad. Lake experts, called limnologists, will often use the scientific name of the plant to make certain whether it is a foreign invasive or a domestic aggressive, both of which need to be identified and destroyed. We will show the scientific name in parentheses after the common name. Middle Bolton Lake has a history of recurring invasions of Variable Leaf Milfoil (*Myriophyllum heterophyllum*) which spreads out along the shore and makes swimming almost impossible. Lower Bolton Lake experienced an aggressive growth of Southern Naiad (*Najas guadalupensis*) which peaked in 2012 making the lake unfit for recreation for the latter part of the summer.

Other threatening plants have been seen in our lakes. These include: Fanwort (*Cabomba caroliniana*), Curly Leaf Pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*), and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*). You can have these invasive plants identified by following the instructions found [on the FBL website here](#). If you want to learn the first steps of what these plants look like there are many web sites. A good place to start is [Connecticut's Aquatic and Wetland Invasive Plant Identification Guide](#) published by the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station's Invasive Aquatic Plants Program.

A final point to remember is that most water plants can be spread by fragmentation. Small pieces of the plant that get broken off while swimming or boating will reattach to the bottom of the lake at some other location and start a new patch. Therefore, we must be very careful not spread pieces of plants from one place to another, especially from lake to lake.