Eurasian Watermilfoil

Myriophyllum spicatum **Class B Non-Regulated Noxious Weed Control Recommended**

Variable-leaf Milfoil

Myriophyllum heterophyllum **Class A Noxious Weed Control Required**

Haloragaceae

Legal Status in King County: Variable-leaf milfoil is a Class A Noxious Weed according to Washington State Noxious Weed Law, RCW 17.10 (non-native species that is harmful to environmental and economic resources and that landowners are required to eradicate). In accordance with state law, the King County Noxious Weed Control Board requires property owners to eradicate variable-leaf milfoil from private and public lands throughout the county (eradicate means to eliminate a noxious weed within an area of infestation). Eurasian watermilfoil is a Class B Non-Regulated Noxious Weed (non-native species that can be designated for control based on local priorities). The State Weed Board has not designated this species for control in King County. The King County Weed Control Board recommends control of Eurasian watermilfoil where feasible, but does not require it. State quarantine laws prohibit transporting, buying, selling, or distributing plants, plant parts or seeds of these milfoils.

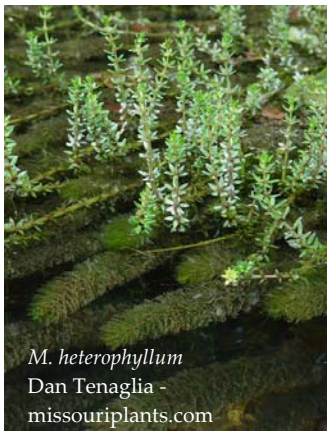
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

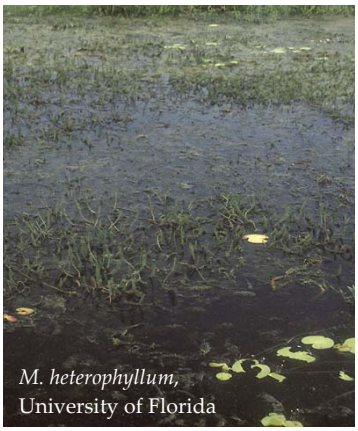
Impacts and History

- Eurasian watermilfoil is native to Eurasia but is widespread in the United States, including Washington. In King County it is present in numerous lakes and slow moving streams and rivers.
- Variable-leaf milfoil is native to the eastern United States. It was introduced to southwestern British Columbia several decades ago and was confirmed in Thurston and Pierce Counties in 2007.
- Both of these plants are very aggressive and can outcompete native aquatic plants, forming dense


M. spicatum, University of Minnesota


M. spicatum, Andrzej Martin Kasiński


M. heterophyllum Dan Tenaglia - missouriplants.com


M. heterophyllum, University of Florida

monotypic stands. They can reduce biodiversity, change the predator/prey relationships in a lake and adversely impact the food web.

- These milfoil species impact recreation by eliminating swimming opportunities, fouling boat motors and snagging fishing lines.
- When allowed to grow in dense stands and "top out", the floating mats or emergent flower stems prevent wind mixing, and extensive areas of low oxygen can develop during the summer.
- Stagnant mats create mosquito breeding areas and increase the water temperature underneath by absorbing sunlight.
- These plants die back in the fall, and the resulting decay uses up dissolved oxygen and adds nutrients to the water, potentially increasing algae growth and related water quality problems.

Description, Reproduction and Spread

Milfoil species (*Myriophyllum* spp.) can be very difficult to tell apart, particularly when not in flower. Not only can the vegetative structures look very similar, but Eurasian watermilfoil (M. *spicatum*) is known to cross with the native northern milfoil (*M. sibiricum*), creating an invasive hybrid. Anyone who finds a new, aggressive population of milfoil should consult an expert to get a positive identification before taking action to control it.

Eurasian watermilfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*)

- Perennial, rhizomatous plant grows in water to 20 feet (possibly up to 30 feet) deep.
- Forms tangled underwater stands and dense floating mats.
- Leaves are in whorls of four, and are feathery, with generally more than 14 leaflet pairs per leaf. Leaves often appear squared-off at the tip. Leaves usually collapse against the stem when the plant is pulled from the water.
- Stems are long, branched near the surface, and usually reddish.
- Flowers are tiny and borne on reddish spikes above the water surface.
- Spread is generally by plant fragments or rhizomes.

- Can be confused with the native northern milfoil (*Myriophyllum sibiricum*), which generally has fewer than 14 leaflet pairs per leaf. The native milfoils also tend to retain their shape when pulled from the water rather than collapsing against the stem.

Flowering stalk, *M. heterophyllum*


Flowering stalk, *M. spicatum*

Variable-leaf milfoil (*Myriophyllum heterophyllum*)

- Perennial, rhizomatous plant grows in water to 15 feet deep.
- Forms tangled underwater stands and dense floating mats.
- Submersed leaves are in whorls of four to six, and are feathery, with six to 14 leaflet pairs per leaf.
- Flowering spikes emerge up to six inches above the water and have bright green, leaf-like bracts that are in whorls of 4 to 6 with toothed to entire margins.
- Flowers are tiny and borne in the axils of the leaf-like bracts.
- Submersed stems are stout (up to 8 mm in diameter), reddish, often with numerous branches. A cross-section of the stem will reveal "pie-shaped" air chambers.
- Spread is by plant fragments, rhizomes and seed.
- Has the ability to produce terrestrial plants with leaves resistant to drying. These apparently do not colonize new areas, but aid in the survival of the species in years when the water level is unusually low.
- Can be confused with the native western milfoil (*M. hippuroides*), which also has emergent flower stems with leaf-like bracts, and vegetative plants can be confused with the native northern milfoil (*Myriophyllum sibiricum*), which also has fewer than 14 leaflet pairs per leaf.

Habitat

- Milfoils grow in still and slow moving water, generally up to about 20 feet deep for Eurasian watermilfoil, and six to 15 for variable-leaf milfoil, depending on water clarity.
- They tend to cluster at downwind ends of smaller water bodies or in quiet coves where fragments can settle out of the water column and take root.
- Both tolerate a wide range of pH.
- Eurasian watermilfoil can tolerate brackish water.

Local Distribution

- Eurasian watermilfoil is widespread in western Washington and in King County, with established populations in the large lakes (Lakes Washington, Sammamish and Union), the Sammamish River, and a number of smaller lakes (notably Green Lake in Seattle).
- Variable-leaf milfoil was discovered in a lake in Thurston County in 2007, the first confirmed record in Washington State. It has since been found in another lake in Thurston County, as well as in two lakes in Pierce County (Blue and Clear Lakes), all four of which are privately owned. Since it is particularly difficult to distinguish from the native western milfoil (*M. hippuroides*), it may be established in other areas as well. The Washington State Department of Ecology is investigating other potential populations. At this writing, there are no confirmed populations of variable-leaf milfoil in King County.

CONTROL INFORMATION

Integrated Pest Management

- The preferred approach for weed control is Integrated Pest Management (IPM). IPM involves selecting from a range of possible control methods to match the management requirements of each specific site. The goal is to maximize effective control and to minimize negative environmental, economic and social impacts.
- Use a multifaceted and adaptive approach. Select control methods which reflect the available time, funding, and labor of the participants, the land use goals, and the values of the community and landowners. Management will require dedication over a number of years, and should allow for flexibility in method as appropriate.

Planning Considerations

- Survey area for weeds, set priorities and select best control method(s) for the site conditions and regulatory compliance issues (refer to the King County Noxious Weed Regulatory Guidelines).
- Small infestations may be effectively removed using manual methods or hand tools.
- Milfoil spreads by fragmentation, so care must be taken to contain and remove all plant fragments when using manual or mechanical control methods. Otherwise, the infestation will spread.
- Any control actions taken will necessarily affect all landowners adjacent to the water body and will require their approval and participation in order to succeed. In addition, many control options will be expensive and it will be more cost-effective to pool resources.
- Commit to monitoring. Once initial control has been achieved, be sure to conduct follow up monitoring and control in subsequent years in order to catch any overlooked patches or returning infestations before they can spread. Without this, control efforts can be wiped out within a few years. Monitor the site each year for at least three years after last observing any milfoil, and then again after three years.
- Any water body with a public boat launch should be monitored regularly since milfoils can be re-introduced easily from plant fragments on a boat or trailer.

Permitting and Regulatory Requirements

- Permits are required for all weed control work in natural water bodies.
- At minimum, the pamphlet **Aquatic Plants and Fish** is required. This pamphlet is published by the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and acts as a Hydraulic Project Approval (HPA) permit. It is available free of charge online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hab/aquaplnt/aquaplnt.htm or by calling (360) 902-2534. This "pamphlet HPA" is all you will need for most manual or light mechanical control methods.
- More extensive control, including some bottom barrier placement and all herbicide use, will require additional permits from Washington State. See the sections below for details.
- Permits and licenses are required for all herbicide use in aquatic systems. Minimum requirements include a pesticide applicator's license with an aquatic endorsement from the Washington Department of Agriculture and a permit from the Washington Department of Ecology.
- Some incorporated cities also regulate any work conducted in natural waterbodies. Contact your local jurisdiction for details.
- **Permit requirements can change from year to year. Contact the King County Noxious Weed Control Program for more information on current permitting requirements.**

Early Detection and Prevention

- Look for new plants. Get a positive plant identification from an authority such as King County Noxious Weed Control Program staff.
- Look for plants along lake shorelines and in stagnant or slow-moving water in wetlands and streams. Since these plants are often spread as fragments attached to boat motors and trailers, check especially around boat launches. Also check at the downwind end of the waterbody, and anywhere else where fragments could congregate or settle out of the water column.
- The best time to begin surveys is late spring when plants are visible, and surveys can continue into early fall when the plants senesce (die back).
- Clean all plant material off of boats, motors and trailers, and check bilgewater for plant fragments any time you have been in an infested water body (or a potentially infested water body).
- **Never dispose of unwanted aquarium or water garden plants or animals in a natural water body**. Variable-leaf milfoil in particular is still sold in some areas as an aquarium plant, and may have been introduced to Washington waters by careless dumping of aquariums.

Manual Control

- At minimum, an HPA pamphlet permit is required for all manual control activities in natural waterbodies. In incorporated areas, check with your local jurisdiction for other possible permit requirements.

- Hand pulling and the use of hand mechanical tools is allowable in all critical areas in unincorporated King County.
- Hand pulling can be successful for a very small area but is impractical for large infestations. Be sure to contain and remove all plants and plant fragments from the water.
- Weed rakes and weed cutters can assist in maintaining open water in a discrete area, such as around a dock, but will not eliminate the plants. Be sure to contain and remove all plants and plant fragments from the water.
- All manual control sites should be monitored for several years for signs of plants growing from roots or fragments.
- **DISPOSAL**: Milfoils can be composted on land away from water or placed in yard waste bins. Do not leave any plant parts or fragments in the water or near the water's edge. Variable-leaf milfoil can grow on exposed soil during periods of low water, so extra care should be taken to dispose of it away from the water.

Mechanical Control

- At minimum, an HPA pamphlet permit is required for all mechanical control activities in natural waterbodies. In incorporated areas, check with your local jurisdiction for other possible permit requirements.
- Cutting and harvesting using boat-mounted cutters or in-lake harvesting barges is effective at maintaining open water in water bodies with 100% of the available habitat infested. It must be done on a regular basis to maintain control. However, these methods will quickly spread these plants by creating numerous fragments, so cutting and harvesting are not recommended for small or partial infestations. Neither method will eradicate an infestation. In unincorporated King County, only an HPA pamphlet permit is required for cutting and harvesting noxious weeds.
- Diver dredging using boat or barge mounted suction dredges can be effective for small infestations or as a follow-up to herbicide treatment. Special care must be taken to remove all fragments. This method causes a temporary increase in turbidity and requires specific authorization from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).
- Rotovation (underwater rototilling) is not recommended since it causes severe fragmentation of the plants. Rotovation also results in significant short term turbidity and loss of water clarity and quality, as well as destruction of benthic habitat. Rotovation requires an individual HPA permit.

Cultural Methods

- An opaque bottom barrier can be used to suppress growth in small, discrete areas like at a boat launch or around a swimming area. Barriers need to be regularly cleaned because plants will root in the sediment that accumulates on top of them. This is not practical for large-scale infestations. Bottom barriers in Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish are not allowed without prior authorization by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) due to potential impact on sockeye salmon

spawning areas. A pamphlet HPA at minimum is required for bottom barrier installation. Other permits may also be required.

- Waterbodies with control structures can sometimes use water level drawdown to control submerged weeds. Generally the bottom must be exposed to heat or cold long enough to dry out completely, something that can be difficult to achieve in rainy western Washington. Occasionally drawdowns can backfire and increase subsequent germination of weed seeds, especially with variable-leaf milfoil. Drawdowns can have major impacts on native plants and other aquatic organisms. Carefully weigh the pros and cons before deciding on this option. A drawdown is not covered by the pamphlet HPA. Consult your local WDFW office for permit information.

Chemical Control

- Permits and licenses are required for all chemical control in water.
- Herbicides may be the most reasonable option for eradication of large submerged noxious weed infestations. Professional licensed contractors are available for hire to perform this task.
- Herbicides can only be applied to aquatic systems in Washington State by a licensed pesticide applicator. Aquatic formulations of herbicides are not available for sale over the counter to anyone without an aquatic pesticide license. **NEVER apply non-aquatic herbicide formulations to water since most of them include ingredients that are toxic to aquatic organisms**.
- Multiple years of treatment may be required to eradicate a milfoil infestation. For several years following treatment, monitor areas for new plants germinating from the seed bank. Remove any new growth using one of the manual control methods above.

Specific Herbicide Information

Milfoil species are dicots, and therefore selective herbicides can be used to control them with minimal collateral damage to the primarily monocot native plant communities. 2,4-D, a selective herbicide, and fluridone, a non-selective herbicide, have both been used to control Eurasian watermilfoil to good effect in western Washington lakes. However, 2,4-D cannot be used in waterbodies that support salmonids (salmon and trout species). Triclopyr, another selective herbicide, has been approved for control of submerged plants as of 2008 and shows promise as an alternative herbicide for milfoil control. Endothall and diquat, which are both contact herbicides, will control existing vegetation, but will not kill the roots, so the control is temporary.

The mention of a specific product brand name in this document is not, and should not be construed as an endorsement or as a recommendation for the use of that product. Chemical control options may differ for private, commercial and government agency users. **For questions about herbicide use, contact the King County Noxious Weed Control Program at 206-296-0290.**

Biological

- Triploid grass carp have been tried as a control for milfoil species, but milfoil is not palatable to them, and they will generally eat everything else in the waterbody first. Grass carp are not allowed in water bodies where the inlet and outlet cannot be screened to prevent fish from leaving the waterbody. Grass carp are not allowed anywhere in the Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish system. They are not recommended as a control for milfoil, although they can be used if these species predominate. Care should be taken to evaluate potential impacts on the native plant community before choosing grass carp as a control method.
- In some situations, the native milfoil weevil (*Euhrychiopsis lecontei*) seems to control Eurasian watermilfoil. The weevil appears to prefer Eurasian watermilfoil over its native host, northern watermilfoil (*Myriophyllum sibiricum*), and in lakes where the weevil occurs naturally, Eurasian milfoil has been shown to be less of a problem. Ongoing research is exploring lake conditions in which the weevil may thrive, including water pH and the abundance of insect-eating fish. Although no permits are needed to use native insects as biocontrol, currently the weevils are difficult to obtain in quantities high enough to have an effect on milfoil populations. Even when they have been specially reared and introduced, it can take several years for populations in a waterbody to reach sufficient levels to control milfoil populations. Biocontrols of any type will not eradicate milfoil, but if effective should reduce a milfoil population to below the threshold of significant impact.

SUMMARY OF BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

- At all times at minimum a pamphlet HPA permit is required to do any activity that disturbs a lake bottom or wetland or streambed. For more extensive work, more specific permits will be required.
- Hand pulling or digging is recommended for small populations, with extreme care taken not to let fragments spread.
- Where a population has filled every possible inch of habitat in a waterbody and its connected waterways, cutting or harvesting when done consistently can maintain open water and diminish the adverse affects of these species.
- Bottom barriers can maintain small areas of open water around boat launches, swimming areas or docks, as long as care is taken to keep them free of debris and fragments.
- Diver dredging can be effective for small infestations or as a follow-up to herbicide treatment.
- To eradicate large areas of milfoil, herbicides are probably the best option.
- **Do not apply any herbicide to water without the proper licenses.** Hire a contractor to do the work.

Control in small isolated or man-made ponds

- Permits may be required (see "Permitting and Regulatory Requirements" section above).
- Drawdown can be very effective. Remove all plants and plant fragments. Let the bed dry out completely before refilling. Thoroughly clean pond liners. Examine or discard ornamental plants that may harbor plant fragments before re-introducing them to the pond.
- Manual control will work if the infestation is caught early and all fragments are removed.
- Bottom barriers may be effective over natural pond beds.
- Follow recommendations above for chemical control.

Control in small lakes

- Permits will be required for all control work (see "Permitting and Regulatory Requirements" section above).
- Community involvement will be essential for successful control efforts.
- For small pioneering infestations, manual control or bottom barriers may be effective. Monitor the lake for fragments and additional infestation sites. Maintain bottom barriers to prevent sediment buildup.
- For large or whole-lake infestations, chemical control will be the most effective (see above for chemical recommendations). Mechanical control may be used to manage infestations, but will not eradicate the weeds. Bottom barriers, if properly maintained, will create open water in small areas.

Control in flowing water (rivers, streams, ditches)

- Permits will be required for all control work (see "Permitting and Regulatory Requirements" section above).
- The most effective control will start with the furthest upstream infestation and move downward. If there are any weeds left upstream, any cleared site will likely be re-infested.
- If possible, contain the area being controlled with a boom to catch fragments before they float downstream.
- Manual control may be the most practical. Bottom barriers need to be securely anchored.
- Chemical control in flowing water is difficult. Consult an expert before considering this option.

Control along shores of Lakes Washington and Sammamish

- Permits will be required for all control work (see "Permitting and Regulatory Requirements" section above).
- Eradication of submerged aquatic weeds from these waterbodies is not practical.
- Bottom barriers, if properly maintained, can provide open water around docks, marinas, swimming beaches, and similar areas. Prior authorization by the Washington

Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is required due to potential impact on sockeye salmon spawning areas.
- Manual control of small patches may be sufficient.
- Mechanical control can be effective for lakeside communities or large marinas. Be sure to remove all fragments from the water.
- Spot control using chemicals can be effective in the right conditions. It is possible that more than one species of submerged noxious weeds may be present (particularly Brazilian elodea, which is increasing in these lakes). If this is the case, be sure to select an herbicide that will control all targeted weeds (consult BMPs for each weed or ask an expert for assistance in selecting herbicides). If there is any significant wave action or current, the chemicals will drift off target or quickly become diluted. Consult with a professional contractor before choosing this option. Neighboring property owners should be advised prior to spot chemical applications.
- Grass carp are not allowed in the Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish system.

Disposal Methods

- Eurasian watermilfoil can be left on land to dry out and/or decompose where it will not move into a waterway.
- Variable-leaf milfoil should not be left on the bank since it may root in damp soil.
- Both milfoils can be composted or placed in yard waste bins.

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