

# Fragrant Water Lily

*Nymphaea odorata*  
Nymphaeaceae

Class C Noxious Weed  
Control Recommended

**Legal Status in King County:** Fragrant water lily is a Class C noxious weed (non-native species that can be designated for control based on local priorities) according to Washington State Noxious Weed Law, RCW 17.10. The State Weed Board has not designated this species for control in King County. The King County Weed Control Board recommends control of this species where feasible, but does not require it.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### History and Impacts

- *Nymphaea odorata* is native to the eastern half of North America, including southern Canada. It has been introduced as an ornamental in many parts of the world and is now found throughout North America. Although found throughout Washington, fragrant water lily is especially prevalent in western Washington lakes where it has been intentionally planted by property owners who admired the showy flowers.
- It is believed that fragrant water lily was originally introduced into Washington during the Alaska Pacific Yukon Exposition held in Seattle in the late 1800s.
- Left unmanaged, water lilies can restrict lake-front access and hinder recreation.
- Drownings in King County have been attributed to swimmers getting tangled in dense water lily stems.
- Water lilies foul boat motors and restrict passage for non-motorized boats.
- When allowed to grow in dense stands, the floating leaves prevent wind mixing and extensive areas of low oxygen can develop under water lily beds during the summer.
- Aggressive water lily mats can outcompete native plants, reduce biodiversity, change the predator/prey relationships in the lake and adversely impact the food web.
- Stagnant mats create mosquito breeding areas and increase the water temperature underneath by absorbing sunlight.
- Water lilies die back in the fall, and the resulting decay uses up dissolved oxygen and adds nutrients to the water, potentially increasing algal growth and related water quality problems.

## Description

- Perennial floating leaved rooted aquatic plant, growing in about three to six feet of water. Blooms June to October.
- **Round, green leathery leaves** up to 10 inches across have a basal slit. The flexible leaf stalk is attached at the base of the slit. The leaves float on the surface of the water, rarely sticking up above it as water level drops.
- **Many-petaled Flowers** are showy and range from white to pink (rarely yellow). They are borne on an individual stalk which curls like a corkscrew after the flower has been fertilized and pulls the flower under water. Seeds are leathery capsules with numerous small seeds.
- Both flower and leaf stalks arise from **thick fleshy rhizomes**.
- Adventitious roots attach the horizontal creeping and branching rhizomes.

## Habitat

- Fragrant water lily occurs in shallow freshwater ponds and lake margins 3-6 feet deep.
- It will also grow in slow moving water.
- It can tolerate a wide range of pH, and it prefers substrates from mucky to silty.

## Reproduction and Spread

- Spreads by floating seed and by rhizomes.
- Seeds disperse through the water by wind and wave action.
- Rhizome pieces can also break off and move through the water before establishing in a new location.
- A planted rhizome will spread to cover about a 15-foot diameter circle in five years.
- Primary source of distribution to new water bodies is deliberate planting. Many cultivars of *Nymphaea odorata* are available in the nursery trade. However, waterfowl can also spread the plant between water bodies.

## Local Distribution

- While fragrant water lily is widely present in western Washington, it is less so in eastern Washington and uncommon to absent in western Oregon lakes.
- *Nymphaea odorata* was found in 27 of 36 surveyed lakes in the developed areas of King County in 1996. The number of ponds and smaller wetlands containing the plant is considerably larger.
- Requests for water lily control represent a high percentage of the herbicide permit requests received by the Washington State Department of Ecology.

# CONTROL INFORMATION

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## 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.
- For many lake and wetland infestations, the whole community will need to be engaged. 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.
- Commit to monitoring. Once initial control has been achieved, be sure to conduct follow up monitoring in subsequent years in order to catch any overlooked patches or returning infestations before they can spread. Without this, your control efforts can be wiped out within a few years.

## 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.
- The best time to begin surveys is late spring when new leaves arise, and they can continue into early fall when the plants senesce.
- Dig up small isolated patches.
- Don't plant fragrant water lily in natural water bodies. It is legal to buy and plant water lilies, but their use as an ornamental should be restricted to small self-contained ponds and other man-made water features with no hydrologic connection to any natural body of water.

## Manual

- Hand pulling or cutting can be successful for a small area if repeated on a regular basis. Impractical for large infestations. Must remove all pulled or cut plants and plant parts from the water. HPA pamphlet permit required.
- Carbohydrate depletion is a technique whereby during each growing season, all emerging leaves are consistently removed. Reports indicate that it takes about two to three seasons to kill the plants. This method is difficult to sustain and impractical for large infestations.
- To completely remove plants by hand you must dig up the entire rhizome. HPA pamphlet permit required.
- All manual control sites should be monitored for several years for signs of plants growing from root fragments and from the seed bank.
- Hand pulling and the use of hand mechanical tools is allowable in all critical areas.
- Fragrant water lily can be composted on land or placed in yard waste bins.

## Mechanical

- Permits are required for all mechanical control 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. Not practical for large-scale infestations.
- Cutting and Harvesting using boat-mounted cutters or in-lake harvesting barges is a reasonable long-term control solution. These must be done on a regular basis to maintain control. Neither method will eradicate an infestation.
- Rotovation (underwater rototilling) dislodges the large, fleshy waterlily rhizomes which can then be removed from the water. This process results in the permanent removal of waterlily rhizomes. Rotovation results in significant short term turbidity and loss of water clarity and quality.
- Other mechanical solutions that have been tried include mounting a backhoe to a barge and digging the plants out.

## Chemical

- Herbicides may be the most reasonable option for eradication of large fragrant water lily 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.**
- For several years following treatment, monitor areas for new plants germinating from the seed bank. Eradicate any new growth using one of the manual control methods above.

## Specific Herbicide Information

**Glyphosate** (e.g. Rodeo™ or Aquamaster™) Apply to actively growing foliage. Avoid runoff. Caution: Glyphosate is non-selective: it will injure or kill other vegetation contacted by the spray. NEVER substitute Round-up™ or other landscape formulations of Glyphosate: these have additives that can devastate aquatic systems.

**Imazapyr** (Habitat®) Apply to actively growing foliage. Caution: Imazapyr is non-selective: it will injure or kill other vegetation contacted by the spray.

**Triclopyr** (Renovate<sup>†3</sup>). Apply to actively growing foliage. Triclopyr is selective: it will injure other broadleaved plants but not grasses or other monocots such as cattails, rushes, or most native aquatic plants.

All the above listed herbicides require the addition of an approved surfactant. Follow label directions for selecting the correct type of surfactant. Be sure that the selected surfactant is approved for aquatic use.

*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

- There is currently no biological control approved for fragrant water lily.
- Although a number of organisms have been studied in the past, there is no current plan to pursue biological control for fragrant water lily due to the widespread use of the plant as an ornamental in private, isolated water features.

## SUMMARY OF BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

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- 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, cutting or digging is recommended for small populations.
- Where this is not practical, cutting or harvesting can keep a large population under control when done consistently.
- Bottom barriers can maintain small areas of open water around boat launches, swimming areas or docks.
- To remove large areas of water lilies, mechanical methods (such as rotovation) or herbicides can be used.
- **Do not apply any herbicide to water without the proper licenses.** Hire a contractor to complete the work.

## Disposal Methods

- Fragrant water lily can be left on land to dry out and/or decompose in an area where it will not move into a waterway.
- Fragrant water lily can also be composted away from water or placed in yard waste bins.
- Never dispose of fragrant water lily into waterways, wetlands, or other wet sites where it might grow and spread.

## References

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