

Invasive Alien Plant Species of Virginia

Parrot's Feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum* (Vell.) Verd.)

Description

Parrot's feather, a member of the water-milfoil family (Haloragaceae), is a herbaceous aquatic perennial that gets its name from the feather-like appearance of its gray-green leaves. The leaves are arranged around the stem in whorls of four to six, and may be submerged or emergent. Stiff, bright green, emergent leaves are 1 to 2 inches long with 10 to 18 segments per leaf. The stem and leaves can grow up to a foot above the water surface, giving the appearance of small fir trees. The submerged leaves are limp, but the stems are stiff and very vigorous. When attached to a bank, the plant can extend several yards across the water. Male and female flowers are on different plants, but only the female plants have been found in North America. Besides parrot's feather and another non-native, Eurasian water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*), eight native species of *Myriophyllum* are found in eastern North America. Consult a botanist to confirm identification before initiating any control measures.

Habitat

Parrot's feather is a native of the Amazon River and was introduced to North America in the Washington, D.C., area around 1890. However, since its

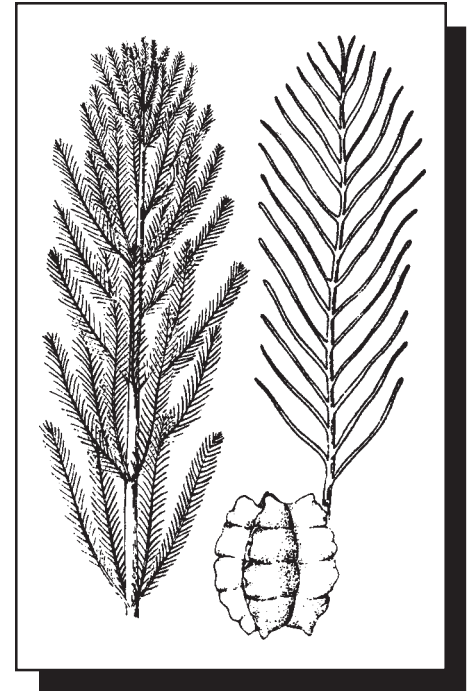
introduction, the plant has spread throughout the southern United States and northward along both coasts. It appears to prefer warmer, milder climates and has spread quickly via plant fragments through waterways and drainage systems and intentional plantings.

Threats

Because of its appearance and ease of cultivation, parrot's feather has been used extensively in both indoor and outdoor aquaria and as a popular water garden plant. It has escaped cultivation, however, and while parrot's feather may provide cover for some aquatic organisms, it can seriously change the physical characteristics of lakes and streams. The shade from dense infestations can alter aquatic ecosystems, and the thick growth can clog irrigation and drainage canals. Many municipalities are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to control parrot's feather. Flooding, drainage and irrigation problems, and increased mosquito populations are all legacies of this single aquatic plant. Yet it continues to be a challenge to persuade garden centers to remove it from their inventories.

Control

Because parrot's feather spreads rapidly through fragmentation of



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plant parts, using mechanical controls such as cutting and underwater rototilling will tend to enhance its rate of spread. Although it is considered by some to be susceptible to herbicides, achieving complete control is difficult. The emergent stems and leaves have a waxy cuticle that requires a surfactant for penetration. Surfactants, however, are harmful to most aquatic organisms. Use herbicides approved for use in wetlands and follow the label directions. One nursery owner killed a severe infestation in his irrigation pond by drawing down the pond in

For more information, contact the Department of Conservation and Recreation or the Virginia Native Plant Society.



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winter and freezing the plant out, apparently completely eradicating it.

This fact sheet was substantially prepared by Barry Reynolds to fulfill course requirements at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University.

References

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