



Ever Heard of Milfoil?

If you haven't heard of variable milfoil before, you are lucky—this means you probably haven't had to interrupt a day of boating out on the lake to painstakingly unwind the long, spindly threads of this slimy, musty-smelling, seaweed-like plant wrapped tightly, and annoyingly, around your boat propeller. Unfortunately, many of you have likely had unpleasant encounters with variable milfoil (*Myriophyllum heterophyllum*), the unwanted invasive aquatic plant that has made its home in New Hampshire and is causing problems in approximately 75 waterbodies.

What is milfoil? There are six native milfoil species present in New Hampshire that do not cause problems because they evolved naturally in this region—climatic factors and natural predators keep these native species populations in check. Unfortunately, there are two invasive species of milfoil, variable milfoil and Eurasian milfoil, which came to New Hampshire from a different region, leaving their natural predators behind and allowing them to grow abundantly when they find a place they like. Of the two invasive milfoils, variable milfoil is the more aggressive species since it loves the Granite State's acidic waters.

What does variable milfoil look like? Variable milfoil is a submerged aquatic plant with fine, densely-packed, feather-like leaves whorled around a main stem. Some people say it looks like a fuzzy green pipe cleaner or a tall, skinny underwater Christmas tree. It can grow up to an inch per day and up to approximately 15 feet in length. In late-July, it may exhibit a three- to six-inch green spike-like flower above the waterline.

How did variable milfoil become established in New Hampshire? Variable milfoil has been in New Hampshire since the late 1960s. It likely hitchhiked its way to the Lake Winnepesaukee region on a boat or trailer from an infested lake in another state. Variable milfoil can live out of the water for up to a week if it remains moist, like when it is wound around a wet carpeted bunk on a boat trailer, and once the plant hits the water, it can start growing again. Another theory is that milfoil was introduced into a New Hampshire waterbody through the dumping of a home aquarium since milfoil is sometimes used as an ornamental plant in fish aquariums. And, some think that birds are the culprit behind the spread of variable milfoil; however, it is unlikely that birds are the cause of very many infestations. State biologists are convinced that boaters who recreate on many lakes during a boating season help milfoil hitchhike its way from waterbody to waterbody since new infestations of variable milfoil (and other invasive species) are usually found first in shallow waters near public boat launches.



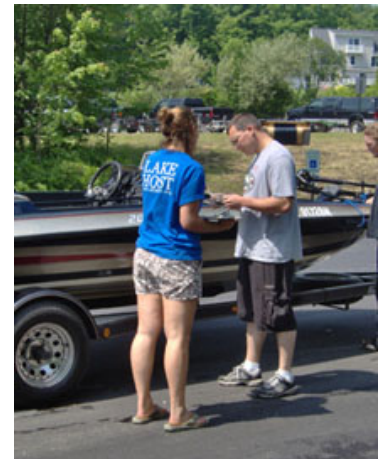
Variable milfoil, an exotic aquatic plant, can make boating unpleasant by fouling boat propellers. (Photo courtesy of New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services.)

Why is variable milfoil a problem? Variable milfoil infestations in lakes and ponds are undesirable because they make recreation dangerous and unpleasant. It is hard to imagine anyone enjoys having to untangle a rat's nest of plants around their boat propeller. And, believe it or not, there have been reported deaths due to drowning affiliated with this plant (but none that we know of occurring in New Hampshire). To make matters even worse, invasive plants, including variable milfoil, disrupt the ecological balance of waterbodies, reduce shoreline property values, and are difficult and expensive to control. Once a waterbody is infested with an invasive species, it is almost impossible to get rid of it!

Once established, how does variable milfoil infest other areas of a waterbody? Boat propellers will chop milfoil plants into small fragments. These fragments float on the water surface and are at the mercy of wind and lake currents. In a short time, roots form on these fragments. If washed into shallow areas, these plants will eventually take hold creating a new milfoil colony. This process will continue until every suitable area of the waterbody is clogged with these weeds.

What control measures are being used in New Hampshire? Unfortunately, once entrenched, invasive plants cannot be eradicated—they can only be controlled. Various control practices, including hand-pulling, benthic barriers, and herbicide applications are being used throughout the state. Such weed management practices cost over one million dollars annually for the state, municipalities, and local residents. However, please do not take the management of aquatic plants around your shoreline property into your own hands—you must contact the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services at (603) 271-2248 before you consider removing any plants or putting any chemicals (even those you may have seen advertised on the internet or in a catalog into the lake to get rid of the weeds)—not only is the application of herbicides by an untrained, unlicensed person illegal, it jeopardizes the health and welfare of the lake and those who recreate in it or get their drinking water from it.

What is NH LAKES doing about invasive species? In 2018, the seventeenth year NH LAKES' highly effective and popular Lake Host courtesy boat inspection and invasive species prevention program was conducted. Each summer approximately 800 Lake Hosts are stationed at approximately 100 of the busiest boat ramps throughout the state to help boaters prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species, including variable milfoil. You may have met one of our blue-shirted Lake Hosts at your favorite lake offering to show you how to inspect your boat, trailer, and recreational gear to remove hitchhiking invasive species. Since 2002, hundreds of paid and volunteer Lake Hosts have inspected one million boats and trailers and have removed nearly 1,600 specimens of invasive species that were about to enter or had just left a waterbody. In addition, the number of future "saves" that Lake Hosts have made by simply educating boat owners about how to prevent the spread of invasive species into New Hampshire's lakes is immeasurable.



NH LAKES Lake Hosts teach boaters how to prevent the spread of invasive species.

What you can do to prevent the spread of milfoil and other invasive plants.

Even if you use a boat ramp during summer that is not staffed by a Lake Host (or if you don't use a ramp at all), you can help prevent the spread of invasive species by following these simple steps:

- Clean your boat, trailer, and recreational of all aquatic vegetation, animals, mud, and other debris each time before entering or after leaving a waterbody, even if a Lake Host isn't present to help you.
- Avoid weed patches and areas designated as "Restricted Use Areas" while boating. This will reduce the chances of spreading the weed to other parts of the lake. Remember, any broken piece of milfoil can start a new plant.
- Remove all fragments of plants that show up on the shoreline and dispose or compost them in an area where they will not float back into the lake.
- Educate your neighbors, renters, and any new property owners in the neighborhood about invasive species and what they can do to prevent their spread.
- Participate in the Lake Host Program at your local lake, or start a program if one doesn't exist. Contact NH LAKES to find out more.
- Become a "Weed Watcher" and report any suspected invasive species infestations you find in the lake to the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services at (603) 271-2248.

NH LAKES is the only statewide, member-supported nonprofit organization working to keep New Hampshire's lakes clean and healthy, now and in the future. The organization works with partners, promotes clean water policies and responsible use, and inspires the public to care for our lakes. For information, visit www.nhlakes.org, email info@nhlakes.org, or call 603.226.0299.

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