



“What’s this green cotton candy stuff in the lake?”

by Andrea LaMoreaux, Vice President, NH LAKES



Filamentous algae in our lakes may have a greenish to yellowish hue.

Typically, in mid-July the calls like this start coming into the NH LAKES office...

“Hi, I was out sailing on the lake yesterday and I saw something strange in the water,” reported the curious caller. “It was floating under the surface and looked like a billowy yellow-green colored cloud.”

“Did it look like cotton candy?” I asked.

“Why, yes, I suppose that it did,” confirmed the caller.

What is it? You may find billowy masses of what looks like cotton candy in your lake in mid-summer, typically following a long hot spell, or after significant rains. The clouds often congregate in shallow water near the shoreline, but can also be found floating aimlessly out in the deep open water. This cotton candy-like mass is actually made up of hair-like strands of thousands, maybe even millions, of individual single-celled green algae (microscopic plants) connected end-to-end. The algae provide valuable food and cover for aquatic insects and fish.

How does it happen? Filamentous algae typically form on lake bottoms in shallow areas or on submerged objects where the water is clear and where sunlight reaches the bottom. As the algae grow, oxygen is

produced and gets trapped in the tangled strands. This trapped oxygen makes the algal mass buoyant, causing it to rise to the surface of the lake.

What does it mean? All types of algae, including filamentous algae, are normal and important components in a lake. However, excessive growth of filamentous algae can become a nuisance to lake users and may indicate that there is a phosphorus pollution problem in the waterbody. (Phosphorus is the nutrient that aquatic plants and algae use to grow and it comes from sources such as fertilizer and eroding soil.)

Here's what you can do. If you find these clouds of filamentous algae in your lake offensive, you can try to remove them. However, grabbing a handful typically yields only a few stringy, slimy threads of algae. If you do manage to capture some, you might want to use it as fertilizer or mulch in your garden. (By the way, this type of algae is not likely to be toxic so don't worry about it contaminating your tomatoes or other produce.)

The best way to reduce the amount of all types of algae, including filamentous green algae, in the lake is to reduce the amount of phosphorus that flows off of your property and into the water. You can do this by not using fertilizer on your lawn (most likely, your lawn doesn't need the additional nutrients anyway), leaving or planting a thick row of native groundcovers, ferns, shrubs, and trees along the shoreline (like wintergreen, sweet fern, lowbush blueberry, and dogwoods), and by diverting runoff rainwater from your roof and driveway into vegetated areas or trenches filled with crushed-stone.

For more information: If you find something unusual or fascinating in the lake, contact NH LAKES and we'll help you figure out what it is and what it means!

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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