

Florida Waters: Ours to Protect

Of the nearly 4,000 plant species growing in the wild in Florida, about 1,000 are non-native or “exotic.” Most of them are not a problem. However, about 130 plant species are considered invasive.

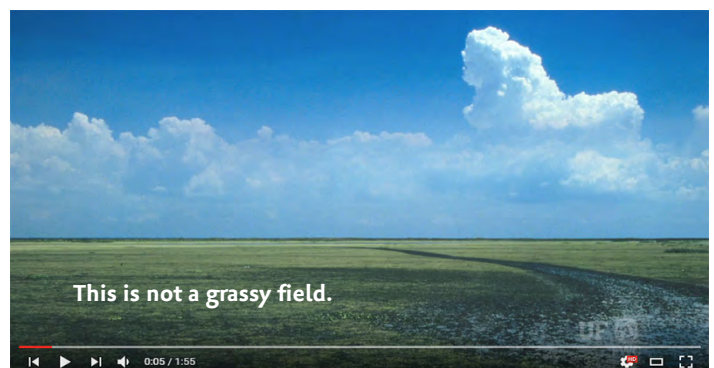
An invasive plant is a non-native plant that causes harm to the environment, economy, or public health. In Florida, approximately 24 aquatic plant species are currently considered invasive.* Many of them have been introduced largely from global commerce and trade (imported aquarium and water garden plants and ballast water from ships) and also from recreational boat travel. Once introduced into a waterbody, plants are easily spread by boats and other recreational equipment.

To protect native species and their habitat

Florida is home to over 2.5 million acres of fresh water, which includes lakes, rivers, springs and wetlands. Aquatic invasive plants threaten native species and habitats, flood control structures, natural areas and resources, and recreation. Without management of invasive aquatic plants, boats would not be able to navigate, people could not safely swim, fish populations would be stunted or move elsewhere, bird populations would be threatened, tourists might go elsewhere, and agriculture crops and neighborhoods could be flooded during storm events.

Native aquatic plants provide food and shelter to native fish and wildlife, lend stability to shorelines, produce oxygen in the water, improve water clarity, and provide aesthetic beauty. Because native plants usually do not take over their home range, there is biodiversity—a number of species growing in balance within the aquatic ecosystem.

Florida is famous for its biodiversity. Biodiversity exists when species are constrained in their growth by natural factors, so they can't overrun their neighboring species. Because non-native invasive plants are usually here without the natural conditions that kept them in check in their native ranges, they can outgrow and replace native plants.

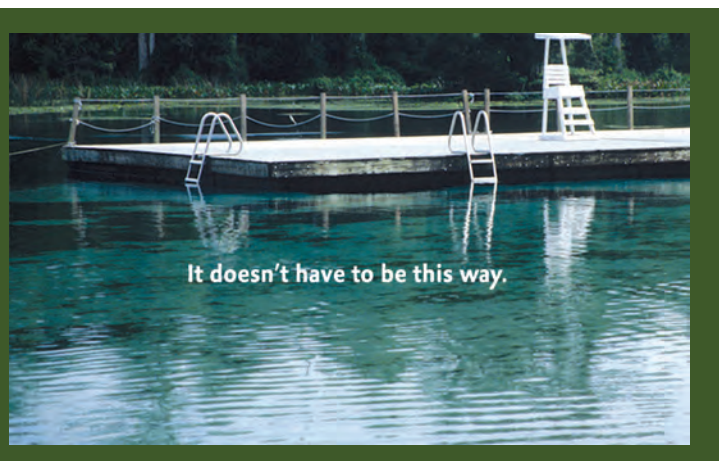


Scenes from “Florida Waters: Ours to Protect” video

Florida’s native wildlife evolved with native plants and often cannot use non-native plants. Some aquatic invasive plants can completely fill the water or cover the surface of our lakes and rivers, resulting in degraded conditions and loss of native plant communities. The destruction and replacement of native plants has several significant consequences:

- Natural biodiversity is reduced or destroyed;
- Rare and endangered species can be eliminated;
- Wildlife does not thrive;
- Native fish may be driven out or fish kills may occur from low oxygen problems caused by the degraded conditions.

* Florida Administrative Code 62C-52.011 Prohibited Aquatic Plants





To protect infrastructure

Dense stands of invasive plants can block or damage infrastructure such as bridges, dams, and flood control facilities, resulting in threats to public safety and millions of dollars in damage.

To protect natural resources

The nearly 8,000 lakes in Florida are some of the most biologically rich systems in the world. Florida's climate and nutrient-rich soils provide year-round growing seasons for aquatic plants and animals. This means Florida lakes are even more susceptible to invasive plants and algae blooms. Proper plant management in freshwater lakes is an important element in maintaining healthy lake ecosystems and ensuring their intended functions.

To protect our playgrounds

Florida is also home to more than 600 springs, and nearly 1,700 rivers and streams that stretch across the state; many are vulnerable to invasive plant species and their associated ecological impacts. Known as the "fishing capital of the world," Florida benefits from a world-renowned fishery. Freshwater fishing alone contributes over \$2.5 billion annually and nearly 25,000 jobs to the Florida economy. Aquatic plant management is essential to the future of such an important recreational and economic resource.

To enjoy, protect, and manage Florida waters

Goals for managing invasive aquatic plants include:

- Preserving healthy habitats for native fish, wildlife, and plants;
- Maintaining lake and canal functions for flood control;
- Ensuring a healthy water supply for drinking and irrigation;
- Facilitating navigation for fishing and other recreation.

Most of the time, it is not possible to completely remove an invasive plant infestation. Once the plants are established, it is more realistic to control them at low levels and prevent them from spreading.

Since it is extremely difficult to predict which plants can become invasive, prevention is another crucial strategy for protecting our waters. Help us spread the message about aquatic invasive plants and protect the unique and treasured natural resources of Florida.

View the video "Florida Waters: Ours to Protect"

plants.ifas.ufl.edu/manage/why-manage-plants

For information on aquatic plant management in Florida:

plants.ifas.ufl.edu/manage

myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/habitat/invasive-plants