



“Currents” June 2018

Aquatic Vegetation

Now that summer has arrived, you may be planning a trip down to the beautiful Guadalupe River to enjoy the clean, clear water. But what if you were met instead by a dense green mat of aquatic plants on the surface of the river? It would probably make you think twice about diving in, but are aquatic plants harmful to us or to the river? What is causing their recent growth? These are some of the questions that have been raised recently by Kerr County citizens who have witnessed large colonies of aquatic vegetation.

The three most common types of aquatic vegetation we see in the Guadalupe River and its tributaries in Kerr County are a type of lily pad called spatterdock, Illinois pond weed, and coontail. Both Illinois pond weed and coontail stay submerged in the water and spatterdock floats on the surface or stands above the water on thick round stalks. For a detailed description of these and other aquatic vegetation, visit Texas A&M AgriLife Extension’s Aqua Plant website (aquaplant.tamu.edu).

So far this summer, UGRA has received several reports of large colonies of aquatic vegetation stretching across the river in some places. The recent proliferation of aquatic plants could be due to a variety of factors including low and stable water levels, lack of flooding, and abundant nutrients in the water. Illinois pondweed and spatterdock are strongly rooted in the sediment in the river. We have had many years without a large flood event to scour the river and flush the sediment downstream, so abundant habitat currently exists for these plants. The stable and shallow water level of the river also provides favorable conditions for aquatic vegetation growth. Additionally, nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus which are essential for plant growth can concentrate in slow moving water and create a steady source of food for the plants.

Aquatic plants are an often misunderstood part of freshwater ecosystems. In fact, many people would rather not have them in their favorite swimming or fishing hole, and that is understandable. However, it’s important to remember that aquatic plants do play a significant role in a water body. Coontail and Illinois pondweed provide valuable habitat for aquatic invertebrates which are vital to the river ecosystem. Spatterdock also provides excellent habitat for fish and the seeds are eaten by waterfowl. Vegetation also protects the river from extreme summer temperatures by shading the water and keeping temperatures slightly lower while also producing oxygen.

Recently, UGRA has fielded several inquiries about the use of herbicide to kill aquatic plants in the river. The application of herbicide to control aquatic plant growth is regulated by the Texas Department of Agriculture and a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Aquatic Vegetation Management Plan must also be approved prior to application. We urge anyone wanting to apply herbicides to aquatic plants to consult with both agencies. Even though the sight of dense aquatic vegetation is unpleasant and can be a nuisance to some, overall the vegetation is an important part of the aquatic ecosystem and isn’t harmful to us or the river.

Let’s Keep Our River Clean

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