

Aquatic invaders

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Non-native plants emerge at Orchid Heights

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Times-Tribune

Water lettuce and water hyacinth may not possess menacing names, but the two invasive species recently burst aggressively into Middleton's wetland ecosystem in what biologists and conservationists admit is still something of a mystery.

Hoping to limit potential destruction of native species by the newcomers, citizens and city, county and state workers banded together two weeks ago in an attempt to remove the plants.

According to Alice Thompson, of Thompson & Associates Wetland Services, water lettuce was first observed in Florida in 1765, but experts are unsure if it is native to North America or if it made its way here from South America.

The plant, which typically thrives in warm weather, is "certainly not native to Wisconsin," Thompson pointed out.

Water hyacinth is native to Brazil, and was first introduced to the United States in 1884, in New Orleans. It is "extremely invasive," according to Thompson, and can double its population in as little as six days. It has, however, gained less of a foothold in Middleton than water lettuce. At least for now.

Water lettuce had been observed in isolated spots in recent years, but earlier this month thousands of the plants — whose seeds scientists had thought could not survive Wisconsin's harsh winters — emerged, seemingly out of nowhere, and blanketed the northern and southern ponds at Orchid Heights

Park. Using a pipeline, they subsequently made their way into the neighboring marsh.

Two weeks ago, workers — operating from canoes and kayaks as well as the shoreline — corralled an estimated 13 tons of what was primarily water lettuce.

The plants were loaded into dump trucks using a conveyor belt on loan from Dane County. The aquatic plants were captured using floating swimming pool lane dividers and even kayaks and paddles used to prod the plants to shore.

"We were just kind of roping and pulling them in," Thompson said. "We did really well, I think — we got about 99.9 percent of it out of those ponds."

It took three days of labor, but some plants or seeds may remain in hidden rat or muskrat holes, she added. Samples of the plants have been sent to the University of Wisconsin to be placed on file, and conservationists say they hope they will not reappear in Middleton in 2011.

"If we see them again next year, we will have to start changing our conceptions about them and asking ourselves whether they really can overwinter here," Thompson explained.

While no one knows exactly what led to the recent invasion, Thompson said the plants are currently sold legally in Wisconsin for use in decorative

fishponds.

"I'm not sure that's such a wise idea at this point," she commented.

Sitting in a kayak two weeks ago, surrounded by volunteers and workers, Thompson said she still harbored hopes that this year's proliferation was an anomaly.

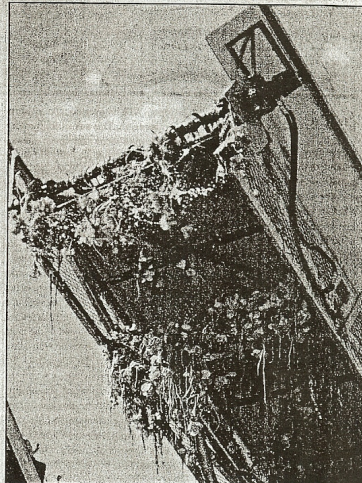
"Hopefully we are overreacting," she said. "That would be the best possible scenario."

Penni Klein, Middleton's public lands manager, said the plants could not have been successfully removed without help from various people and government agencies.

"Thanks to Finance Committee [and the Conservancy Lands Committee] for seeing the threat and acting to provide funds immediately so we could remove it from these ponds, and [Pheasant Branch Conservancy]," she said.

The removal cost the city \$2,500, she said, not including costs to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the value of the free labor provided by volunteers.

Klein also thanked Susan Graham for helping secure the conveyor belt, Geurdon Coombs of the Friends of Pheasant Branch for initially reporting the problem, and Dennis Hellenbrand, of the city's public lands department, for coordinating the removal of the plants.



Seven dump truck loads of aquatic plants were removed from ponds at Orchid Heights Park two weeks ago.