

Common Duckweed (*Lemna minor*)

Story and photos by Soni Forsman



Duckweed with *Nymphaea* 'Helvola' in a container water garden

Common duckweed, a tiny free-floating aquatic plant, receives little if any attention as a plant for home water gardens but it deserves some. Most often duckweed is thought to be algae when it blankets stagnant or slow-moving waters. This humble little plant is more than that 'green' stuff seen on ponds. In colonies, it shades the water, absorbs harmful nutrients and is a high-protein source of food for waterfowl and fish. It is also used in pharmaceutical research, eaten in Southeast Asia and is an aquarium plant.

The petite plant is a flat, single, oval-shaped leaf or frond less than a fourth-inch long. Each leaf has an air pocket for floatation and a wee root. It is native to much of the world, growing in both sun and shade and as far north as zone 4. The USDA US Forest Service website says duckweed has the smallest known flower. While rarely seen, the flowers attract flies, mites, small spiders and even bees.

Duckweed may be a native but it quickly spreads. It reproduces rapidly by division in nutrient-rich water and is difficult to control if left unchecked. Dense mats covering a pond for some time can lead to oxygen depletion and fish kill. An environmentally-friendly suggestion for removal is to wait for the wind to blow masses of the plant to the shore and net. Aquatic birds and mammals, reptiles and amphibians spread duckweed from one quiet body of water to another as they move around.

Due to the rapid growth of duckweed, scientists and researchers are turning its invasiveness into a positive. It is used for bioremediation of waterways with excessive amounts of phosphorus and nitrogen from agricultural runoff according to the Forest Service website. When harvested, it is used as livestock feed or fertilizer. Techniques are being developed to use genetically modified duckweed in creating biomedicines. The website explains plants are immune to animal viruses, making them especially valuable in this research.



A snapping turtle crosses the Forsmans' deck carrying duckweed

Now a few words about duckweed as a plant for water gardens, especially small ones. I add a thimble full to some container water gardens in late spring. It multiplies. Small clusters gather around the small waterlily pads and flowers and snuggle into the base of the upright foliage of a marginal plant(s). When it becomes overly aggressive, I simply remove a handful or two and feed it to the water garden goldfish or compost. It is the perfect size accent plant for a small container.

Duckweed is sold. I did a quick search of a few aquatic plant websites and found a 4-ounce container for \$6.95 and one-half pound for \$13.95. I called a local aquarium store and for \$9.99 I could buy a generous handful. I get mine from the natural pond in our front yard. There is probably a pond in your neighborhood? Removing native plants from their habitats is illegal or at least frowned upon but would a few duckweed plants be missed?