

Water Lettuce

Story and photos by Soni Forsman



Water lettuce (*Pista stratiotes*)

The group of aquatic plants known as floaters could be considered garnishes for the water garden. Water lettuce (*Pista stratiotes*), also called shell flower and water cabbage, adds a decorative finish to any size water garden. The common names describe the plant's lettuce-like appearance.

The heads of water lettuce resemble rosettes. Its light-green leaves have parallel veins, no stems and are covered with tiny hairs, making the leaves look and feel fuzzy. Water lettuce does bloom but the flowers are inconspicuous, hidden amongst the leaves in the center of the rosettes. The flowers grow on very short stems. Lettuce grows long feathery roots that dangle in the water. These roots provide a safe haven for smaller pond fish and can act as spawning media while discouraging algae. Koi may consider the whole plant a salad.

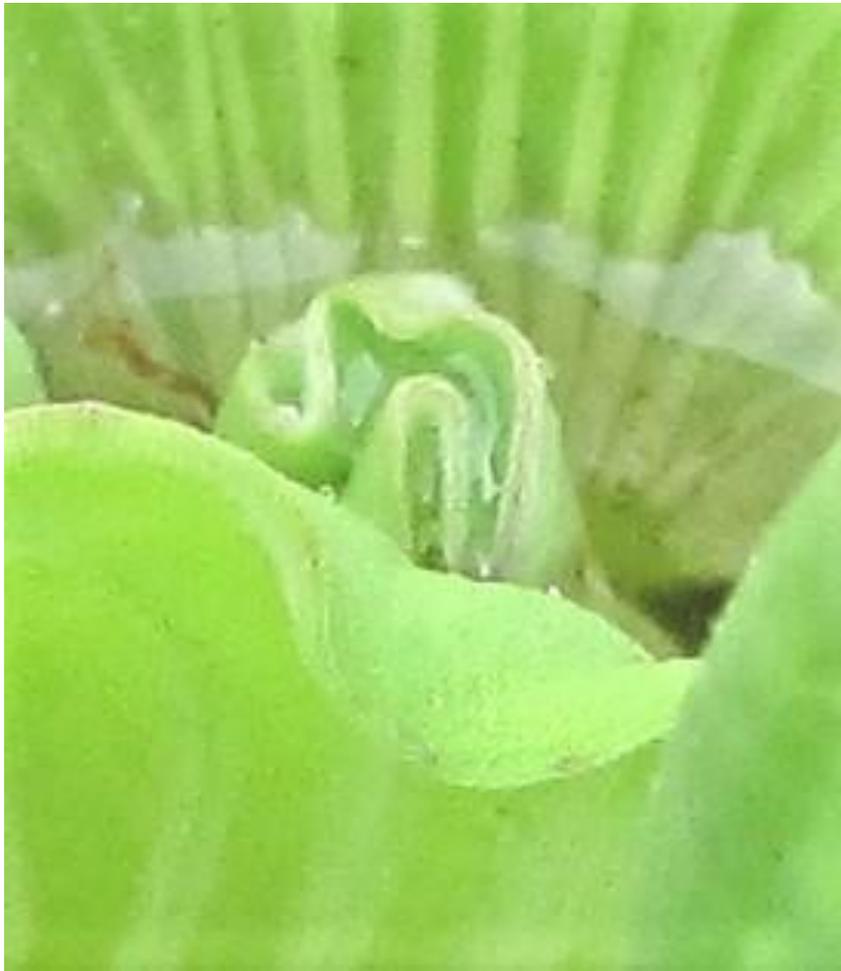
Water lettuce likes warmth and some sun, morning sun is usually OK. Too much sun and the leaves scorch, fade to yellow and begin to decay. Just how much sun water lettuce will tolerate varies summer to summer. The foliage can also turn yellow if the water is lacking in nutrients. Both problems can be remedied. If the lettuce receives too much sun, move it to a shadier spot in the water garden or elsewhere. Placing them between or behind the marginal plants may provide enough shade. For a nutrient problem, remove the lettuce from the water garden and float in a bucket with a fertilizer solution. Treat in the shade. After it has greened up, wash off the roots and return to the water garden.



Young plants attach to the mother plant by stolons

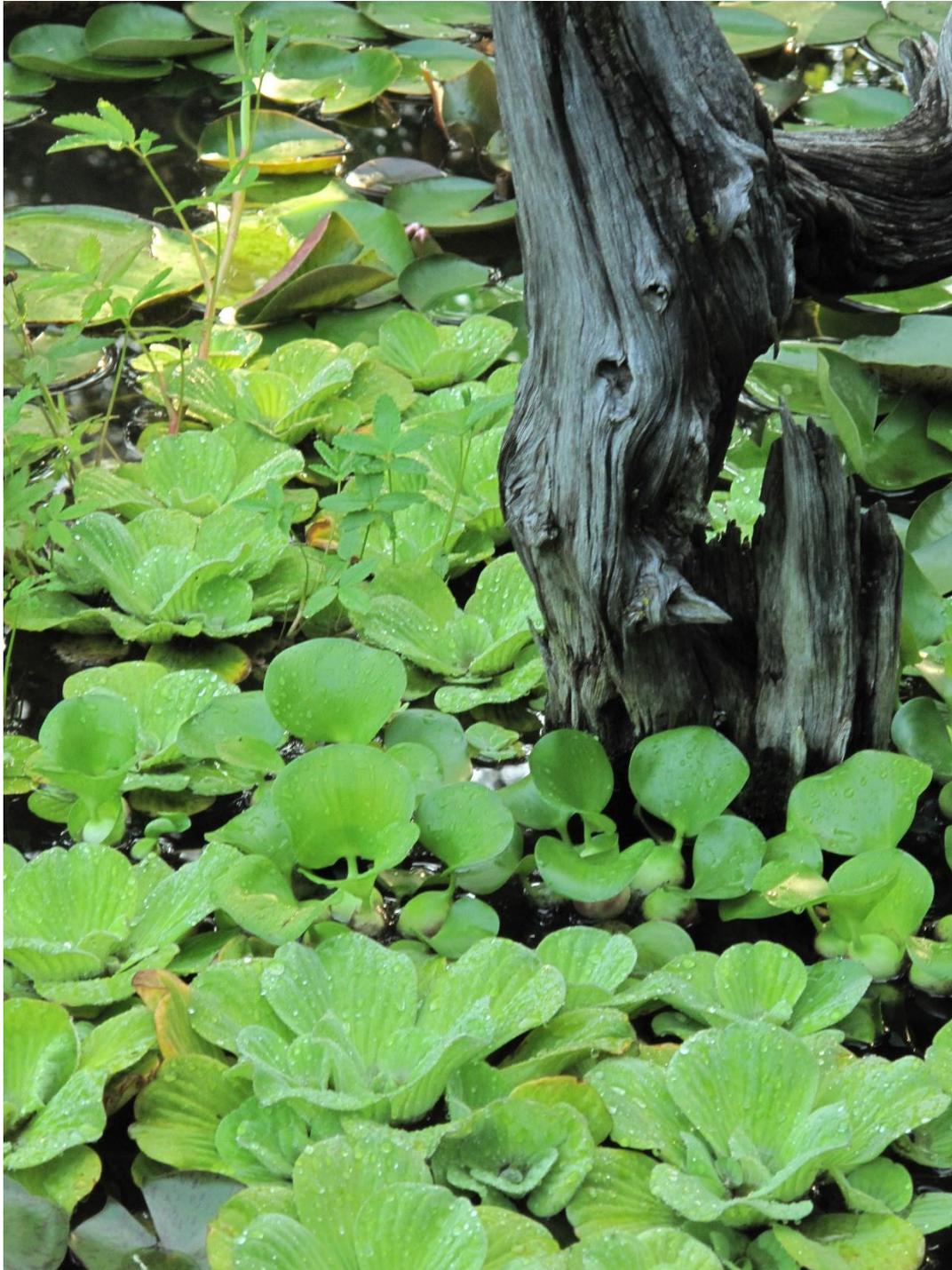
Water lettuce reproduces by seed but most obvious to water gardeners by plantlets connected by stolons to the original plant. If left unchecked in a natural body of water, lettuce will form large floating colonies that cover the entire water surface depriving the pond of oxygen and can lead to fish kill. This floater is listed as a prohibited plant in some states. In Minnesota, it is an unlisted non-native species. This means it can be sold and possessed but cannot be introduced into natural waters without MN DNR approval.

After reading a few websites, I'm not quite sure where water lettuce originated but there is consensus that it is native in South America and Africa and maybe other subtropical and tropical regions. Regardless of where it is native, *Pista stratiotes* is now found around the world. Water lettuce was first recorded in Florida in 1765. It was most likely an accidental introduction, probably through commerce.



The water lettuce flower hides in the center of the rosette of leaves

A few water lettuces at the beginning of the water gardening season will multiply into many. When they spread into other plants' spaces or cover too much of the water's surface, it is time to thin. Share the extras, set up a container of just water lettuces but, most important, take care that they stay contained and are disposed of properly at the end of the season – compost pile or trash. Thanks!



Water lettuce and a few water hyacinth spread around a decorative piece of drift wood in a water garden.