

How was Hydrilla Introduced into Florida?

One of the most invasive of all the non-native plants plaguing Florida's waterways was introduced in either 1951 or 1952. A tropical fish and plant farmer from St. Louis, Missouri, imported what he thought was another species of anacharis (a green submersed plant commonly sold in aquarium stores) from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Because this farmer enjoyed sharing his new finds with others in his profession, the St. Louis tropical fish and plant farmer sent six small bundles, about 10 inches long and 6 inches wide, to another aquatic plant farmer located in the Tampa Bay area. This Tampa Bay farmer operated from two locations, one to grow plants and the other located near the airport for shipping and receiving plant material. This Tampa Bay farmer was not impressed with the color and overall appearance of this new, potential aquarium plant. Believing that he had little commercial use for this species, the Tampa Bay farmer told his manager at the shipping and receiving location to do whatever he liked with them.

The manager almost threw the six bundles into the trash when at the last moment, before ending his work day, he decided to keep the plants alive by storing them in a small wire cage in a canal located at the back of their business address off of Cypress Street. Then, he forgot about them. Several months later, when a shipment of live plant material destined for the northern U.S. missed its flight, the manager of this shipping and receiving location traveled out to the canal to store these aquatic plants overnight for next day shipment. Much to his surprise, the vine-

like submersed plant species that he had placed into the wire cage months before had escaped and spread throughout the canal. The Tampa Bay farm then decided to market this plant under the name Indian Starvine.



Hydrilla. Photo courtesy University of Florida.

Hydrilla spreads to South Florida

The first south Florida farmer to receive "Indian Starvine" was located near Old Cutler Road in southeastern Miami. A former employee of this farm recalled that "Indian Starvine" was being grown and sold as an aquarium plant when she started this job in 1955. Substantial quantities of their aquarium plants were also collected from the Black Creek not far from their farm. Although another former employee, who also worked at this farm, denies the deliberate planting of "Indian Starvine" into the creek, but it was well established there by 1959.

Hydrilla is misidentified at first.

In 1960, the Central and Southern Flood Control District (now the South Florida Water Management District) contacted personnel from the USDA Plantation Field Station regarding a severe aquatic weed infestation in the Snapper Creek Canal located in southern Miami. Lyle Weldon and Bob Blackburn, then USDA scientists, obtained samples of this new species and sent them to the University of Florida at Gainesville, Florida and the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D.C. for identification. Unfortunately, the samples were misidentified by both institutions as *Elodea canadensis*, a common water plant native to the U.S.



Hydrilla surfaced out and covering a Florida lake.

Hydrilla is identified in Florida.

By 1965, Lyle Weldon and Bob Blackburn noticed something wasn't right about this species being identified as a common native water plant. A plant obtained by them from Lake Osborne in Palm Beach County had a subterranean tuber attached to its roots. They speculated that the original identification was incorrect because *Elodea canadensis*, or for that matter, another look alike species, *Egeria densa*, do not produce tubers or subterranean vegetative propagules. Almost immediately, they sent another sample of "Indian Starvine" to Dr. Harold St. John, a recognized

authority on the genus *Elodea*. This time, it was correctly identified as *Hydrilla verticillata*. Ironically, Lyle Weldon, the USDA scientist who was instrumental in confirming the first hydrilla infestation in North America, later lost his life entangled in hydrilla in a SCUBA diving accident in 1972.

Reference:

Source: Schmitz, D.C., Nelson, B.V., Nall, L.E., and J.D. Schardt. 1991. *Exotic Aquatic Plants in Florida: A Historical Perspective and Review of the Present Aquatic Plant Regulation Program*. In: *Proceedings of the Symposium on Exotic Pest Plants* (Center, T.D. et al., eds.), Held on November 2-4, 1988, University of Miami, Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, Miami, Florida. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service Document, Washington D.C. Pages 303-323.