



# Whatcom Weeds

Whatcom County Noxious Weed Control Board 901 W. Smith Road Bellingham WA 98226  
(360) 354-3990 [www.co.whatcom.wa.us/publicworks/weeds](http://www.co.whatcom.wa.us/publicworks/weeds)

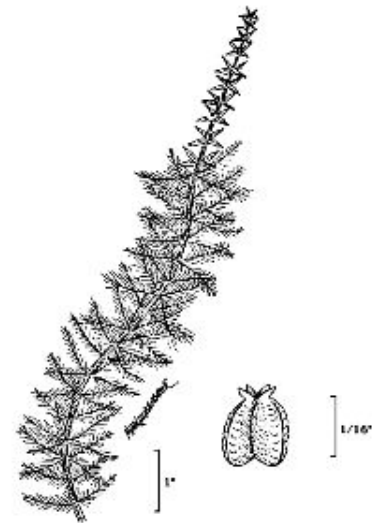
## VARIABLE-LEAF MILFOIL

### *Myriophyllum heterophyllum*

**THREAT:** Variable-leaf milfoil (also called two-leaf milfoil) is an aquatic plant native to the eastern United States. It has recently been found in Washington, although its similarity with the native northern milfoil (*M. sibiricum*) makes it difficult to identify. Variable-leaf milfoil spreads through seeds, rhizomes and, most commonly, plant fragmentation. It grows in still or slow moving water and can form dense mats of vegetation. Infestations of variable-leaf milfoil can completely change the physical and chemical characteristics of the infested water body, leading to changes such as increased sedimentation and depleted oxygen. This plant can impact all uses of the aquatic system, including recreational uses, water movement, and fish and wildlife habitat. It may also create habitat for mosquito larvae. Plants can survive temporary water drawdowns, surviving on the dry banks for a period of time. Variable-leaf milfoil can easily be spread to uninfested water bodies when small pieces of the plants become attached to boating and fishing equipment, or when aquarium plants are discarded into water. Variable-leaf milfoil is sold as an aquarium plant, under the name of red foxtail.

**DESCRIPTION:** Variable-leaf milfoil is a rooted, submersed, perennial plant. It has robust stems that usually have a red tinge. Variable-leaf milfoil has two distinct types of leaves. The submerged plant has featherlike leaves, arranged in whorls of 4 to 6 around the stem. Each leaf has 5 to 14 pairs of leaflets. The plant may also produce an emergent stem, which grows 4 to 6 inches above the surface of the water. The leaves on the emergent stem are lance-shaped, rigid, toothed, and up to ½ inch long. Small, reddish flowers are grouped in clusters of 3 to 6 on the emergent stems, at the base of the leaves. Variable-leaf milfoil flowers from the spring through the fall. It usually grows in water up to 6 feet deep, but occasionally grows in deeper water. It is very adaptable, growing in both still and sluggish water, and tolerates a wide range of temperature, and can survive under ice. It prefers neutral to slightly acidic water.

**MANAGEMENT OPTIONS:** Like all aquatic weeds, control is difficult and eradication may be unrealistic. To prevent the spread of any aquatic plants, all trailers, boats and fishing gear should be carefully inspected to avoid transporting plant materials between water bodies. Aquarium plants should never be discarded in sewer systems or water bodies. Accurate identification of variable-leaf milfoil is essential before control work can begin, as it resembles other aquatic plants, including some native species. Control efforts can include chemical and mechanical measures, although success is usually limited. Cutting the plants will open up the water body, but does not kill the plant, and needs to be done at least twice a season. All plant pieces must be removed from the water as escaped plant fragments will spread the infestation. For small bodies of water or small areas within larger water bodies (such as at boat launches or swimming areas), bottom barriers can be installed to prevent all plant growth. Water drawdowns have also been used to control populations, but success depends on several variables (degree of desiccation, substrate type, temperature and presence of snow). Underwater rototilling can also be used. Grass carp will eat variable-leaf milfoil, but are not usually an effective control agent. Contact the weed control board for site-specific chemical recommendations.



Drawing: USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / USDA NRCS. *Wetland flora: Field office illustrated guide to plant species*. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.