

Algae in Our Lake – Is That Good or Bad?

At certain times of the year, a normally clear lake can appear green and not so clear. You're seeing the presence of algae in the water. In a healthy lake, algae are critical to the balance of life. But, as in life in general, the rule is: Everything in moderation.

Algae are tiny plants that have no stems or leaves but usually contain chlorophyll. They may attach to submerged rocks and branches, or they may float freely in the water. Algae provide food for the tiny creatures (zooplankton) that the fry of our favorite fish love to eat.

Algae exist when all conditions are right: temperature, sunlight, water pH, and the balance of nutrients. A critical nutrient is phosphorous. It must be present in precisely the right amount. Too little and algae will not thrive. Too much and algae will "bloom." That reduces the lake's clarity, appeal and natural balance.

There are several kinds of algae. Tiny green spots floating in the water are fine. Dense mats of stringy brown or green matter near the surface are filamentous algae. They aren't pleasant to look at, but they cause few problems.

The trouble can come in mid- to late summer, when lakes too rich in nutrients experience blooms of blue-green algae. These organisms are really bacteria that form suddenly and grow rapidly. They create a thick, blue-green mat near the surface, forming wavelike patterns in quiet water. During certain times in their lifecycle, these bacteria produce powerful toxins that can make people and pets sick.

So, get to know the natural cycles of your lake. Know when to expect the welcome presence of beneficial algae. Be aware of the sudden changes in algae growth. Don't be alarmed by the presence of tree pollen on the cold lake surface in late spring.

Join your shoreland neighbors to help keep lake phosphorous in equilibrium. Don't use phosphorous fertilizers. Keep your septic system in good working order. Tend to your natural shoreland buffer.

In balance, algae is a good thing. Healthy lake life depends on it. Too much algae may be a sign of a lake under stress.

One in a series of articles sponsored by the Oneida County Lakes and Rivers Association (www.oclra.org). For more information, contact Bob Martini at 715-282-5896 or email to webmaster@oclra.org. OCLRA encourages the use and distribution of this material by lake associations, their members, and other parties concerned about water quality.

Did you know...

Blue-green algae blooms can deplete oxygen in lakes and kill fish.

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