



American White Waterlily

Nymphaea odorata

by Susan Vicedomini

The American White Waterlily is one of those “show-stopping” flowers. After all, what could be prettier floating on the surface of a still body of water than a perfect, crisp white flower with large, green lily pads that resemble the characters of the arcade game Pac-Man?



The American White Waterlily is native to Florida and most of North America. It is a perennial plant with deciduous leaves. It grows in zones 3-11 and is heat tolerant. The ideal depth of water is 12-18 inches but can survive in as little as 6 inches and up to 4 feet or more. It does well in acid or alkaline water.

The fragrant flower is 4-6 inches across. It blooms in the spring through fall. Blooms are best with 5-6 hours of sun, but it will bloom with only 4 hours. It opens in the early morning and closes in the afternoon. There is 1 flower per stem. The stem, or petiole, is purple and rises from the rhizome planted in the soil.

The large, 8-12 inches, round floating leaves are narrowly and deeply cut, almost to the center. The top of the leaf is green and the underneath is red or purple. The leaves have a thick, waxy coating.

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The waterlily propagates by seed and root division (rhizome). The rhizome is 1-1½ inches thick with short black hairs. It is extremely tenacious; even small parts that break off will grow. The flower blooms for 3 days during which the flower is fertilized and can fertilize other flowers. After day 3 the flowers are brought under the water by coiling their stems. The seeds mature under water and after several weeks are released and float on the water for waterfowl to eat and distribute.

Waterlilies help with the quality of the water they live in by chemically cleaning the water. They capture nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus and bind them to carbon in their plant tissue.

A single planted rhizome will cover a 15-foot diameter in 5 years. It is extremely aggressive and considered to be invasive in some states such as Washington. The large, dense mats can make water activities such as fishing and boating difficult. It is not recommended to plant a waterlily in areas unless the depth is over 4 feet and there is a management plan in place for mechanical removal.

It is recommended to plant a waterlily rhizome in a container without holes. The container should be wide and not extremely deep, a plastic dishpan is the ideal shape. On the bottom of the container rocks or small bags of sand should be placed. This will keep the container weighted down in the water. A good garden soil should be used. Do not use potting soil, there are too many particles that will float. You can mix 1/5 manure if desired. Place the rhizome lengthwise with the end without active growth against the side of the container. Cover with sand or rocks to insure the rhizome and soil won't float. A pond-safe, slow release fertilizer should be placed into the container. Push the container in the water until it is about 6 inches submerged. After growth appears it can be pushed out farther to a depth of about 12 inches.

References

[UFL IFAS extension publication #FPS434](#)

[USDA NRCS web site](#)

[Department of Ecology, State of Washington web site](#)

[Pinellas County Extension Timely Topics publication February 14, 2008](#)

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[Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center web site](#)

Danny Cox, Aquatic Areas Specialist at [Naples Botanical Gardens](#)