



USDA-CSREES 2006 National Water Quality Conference

[Preventing the Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species from Water Gardening](#)

The water garden industry is a billion dollar a year enterprise in the U.S. and has been identified as a vector for introducing aquatic invasive species. Aquatic plants are increasingly available locally and over the Internet, few people recognize the risks of releasing aquatic plants into natural waters, and invasive “hitchhikers” often accompany plant shipments. A comprehensive educational strategy reaching suppliers and consumers is critical to prevent new introductions of aquatic invasive species.

In 2004, we surveyed consumers and conducted interviews with nursery professionals. Survey tools were designed to measure awareness and knowledge, identify sources of plants and information, characterize sales and gardening practices, investigate willingness to pay, and assess opportunities for educating customers and nursery employees. Draft messages and educational materials were refined through focus groups with horticulture professionals, agency staff, and water gardeners.

Respondents indicated the threat posed by aquatic invasive species is of serious concern (91% consumers, 57% professionals), but few were able to correctly identify non-native, invasive species of concern in Minnesota. Few consumers (7%) purchase plants or animals over the Internet; 56% choose plants at local retail outlets. Most (86%) expressed a willingness to pay more for hitchhiker-free plants.

Two-thirds of nurseries had received unintended plants or animals in shipments. Fewer than 15% of retail outlets had a process in place to eliminate hitchhikers in their plant receipts; only 25% had a process to prevent unintended plants in their sales. Nearly all retailers (95%) were willing to provide customers with education about aquatic invasive species.

During 2005, 37 Minnesota nurseries piloted educational materials including posters, tip cards, and plant sticks to inform employees and educate customers. Initial evaluation results indicate nurseries found the materials very useful and are willing to pay to use them again next year. Complete survey results and materials will be available.

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