

SHOP TALK

WHAT'S NEW ON THE HOME FRONT

A natural solution to fighting algae in pond

Homeowners experiment with barley straw to keep murky waters clean and clear

By Chuck Green
Special to the Tribune

Forget Al Capone. To south Naperville resident Nancy Taylor, algae is public enemy No. 1.

At least when it comes to her back-yard pond.

Last fall, shortly after Taylor had her pond installed, she participated in a pond walk. Taylor noticed that the water in many of the ponds seemed clearer than hers.

She suspected that someone else noticed too, because not long thereafter, Taylor received information about a product called Clear-It, an all natural, concentrated extract of barley straw, billed by its manufacturer as an "ecologically friendly" and "effective solution to clarify water."

Taylor, who was anxious to rid her pond of "suspended algae," decided to give the extract a try.

"I put it in my pond overnight, and the next morning, the algae was gone. I love instant gratification. I like things to respond," she said.

Fresh idea

Taylor initially used fresh barley straw, which typically takes about six to eight weeks to eliminate algae.

But she found the results to be less than stellar, which Taylor said was frustrating, since she was more than ready for her pond to enhance her outdoor experience. "I love to be outdoors, working in my garden. My pond is my newest part to my garden."

Taylor is among a growing number of people with home ponds. Fourteen percent, or 15 million households, participated in water gardening, which includes home ponds, in 2002, up 1 million from 2001, according to National Gardening Survey 2002, the National Gardening Association's (NGA) comprehensive study of consumer gardening practices, trends and product sales.

Water gardening sales totaled

more than \$1.44 billion in 2002, compared to \$1.2 billion in 2001, a 20 percent increase, according to the NGA.

Last year, 15 million U.S. households participated in water gardening, compared to 5 million in 1997.

"More and more people are using their back yards," said Rose Getch, of the NGA, based in South Burlington, Vt. Getch pointed out that participation in lawn and garden activities in the United States jumped from 68 million U.S. households in 1997 to a high of 85 million in 2002, a 25 percent increase.

"There's been a cocooning approach with the homeowner, where everyone is trying to stay home and enjoy their house," said John Holmes, president of St. Charles based Eco-Ponds USA, distributor of Clear-It. "And people have put in an awful lot of money into back-yard/front-yard landscaping, including ponds. This barley straw extract is a way of minimizing problems with the ponds. I think that, by far, the biggest market is the homeowner that has some decorative water feature in the back yard or house or both."

Bernie Orelup, of Crown Point, Ind., who has three ponds at home, the largest of which is 14 by 8 feet, has used barley straw extract for about five years, and has been pleased with the results.

"I have found that it cuts down on string algae growth and helps keep the water clear. In the past, I've always had algae bloom and string algae. It keeps the water much cleaner than a pond without it."

"Barley straw extract is a very quick, safe, all natural way to enhance the natural beauty of ponds," said Carol Holmes, chairman of Eco-Ponds.

The suggested retail price of Clear-It is \$13.49 for a quarter liter; \$21.98 for half a liter.

Not an exact science

She acknowledged that scientists are not yet sure how barley



Photo for the Tribune by Steve Lasker

Helen Kase of Schaumburg pours barley straw extract into her pond, which has helped clear up string algae, a common problem.

straw extract works.

"This is an all-natural product, and the exact science behind it is not yet known. Scientists in England have been working on barley straw for more than a decade and know that it works, but they don't know yet how it works. There are some people in this country who are fairly divided about it."

Aaron Powers, owner of Aquatic Artforms, a pond installation business in Geneva, said that, among his customers, extract, as well as barley straw, have had their share of success.

"Barley straw or barley straw extract has worked in probably two-thirds of the applications among my customers; in one-third of them, people won't notice the difference at all. It's easy to make blanket statements, 'this thing works, this thing doesn't work.' Fact is,

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—Helen Kase, Schaumburg

there are so many underlying water chemistry variables, with every single well, with every single particular pond, it's difficult to pin an exact pattern down to it just yet."

Carol Holmes also noted that location sometimes can influence the extract's effectiveness.

"In application in the Midwest, you have to fiddle around a bit with the dosage and the parameters to find out what works in your specific location," she said. "We do know some of the

limiting factors, such as high flow-through and fertilizer runoff, but we don't know yet about others, such as hardness of water. It's not like chemicals, where you can calculate parts per million and see results immediately.

"Those people who have worked with it and who have found the right parameters for themselves have found it to be very successful."

Chicago-area pond owners can get varying results from using barley straw.

"I hate to say it, but the Chicago area tends to be one of those places with a higher precedence of barley straw extract and barley straw not working very effectively," she said. "In ponds with a high degree of hard water, which is fairly common in the Chicago area, sometimes barley straw extract and barley

straw do not eliminate algae as effectively. Sometimes people with ponds in this area don't notice as big a difference; then again, sometimes they do."

Helen Kase of Schaumburg is also among those who does.

"I was having a terrible string algae problem, and the barley straw extract helped clear it up," said Kase, who has had her pond for about a year. "I think it works great and love the fact that it's so organically friendly. I don't like to put any chemicals in the pond if I don't have to. Since this is really my first year, it's really a matter of trial by error for me. There are a lot of things you have to do with a pond; you don't just pour water into it and sit back and enjoy."

For more information, call 630-801-1556 or visit www.eco-ponds.com