

## This 'smart' weed is a native species and it is rather pretty too

By **MATT WAGNER**  
**Langlade County**  
**aquatic invasive**  
**species coordinator**

One of the nicest things about my job as the aquatic invasive species coordinator for the Langlade County Waterways Association is the pleasant people that I meet. Anybody in Langlade County can contact me if they have questions regarding plants growing in a particular water body. More often than not, the plants that people are concerned about are beneficial native plants. One of the most common plants which people contact me regarding is our native Water Smartweed. Many people are worried about it growing in their water body because "it looks too pretty to be native." Water Smartweed has beautiful pink flowers which bloom from June through September.

Water Smartweed derives its common name due to the fact that the seeds taste like pepper and have a sharp or smart taste. However, I think a better reason for the "smart" in Smartweed is its fascinating natural history. Water Smartweed is an ancient hybrid of a terrestrial plant and an aquatic plant. Since it has both sets of DNA from its parent plants it can grow either on land or in the water. The genes that the

plant expresses are directly related to the amount of water where the plant grows. If the plant germinates on the shore, then it will express the genes of a terrestrial plant. If the plant germinates in the water, then it turns on the genes which make it an aquatic plant. This trait makes Water Smartweed a very important native plant for our aquatic ecosystems. The terrestrial form provides erosion control along the shoreline while the aquatic form offers shade and shelter for fish as well as habitat for invertebrates. Seeds of Water

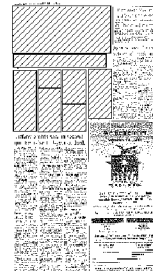
Smartweed can be very important to migratory waterfowl. Extensive beds become regular stopping points during fall migration for gadwall, mallard, teal, and wood ducks. Seeds are also consumed by upland game birds, deer, and muskrat.

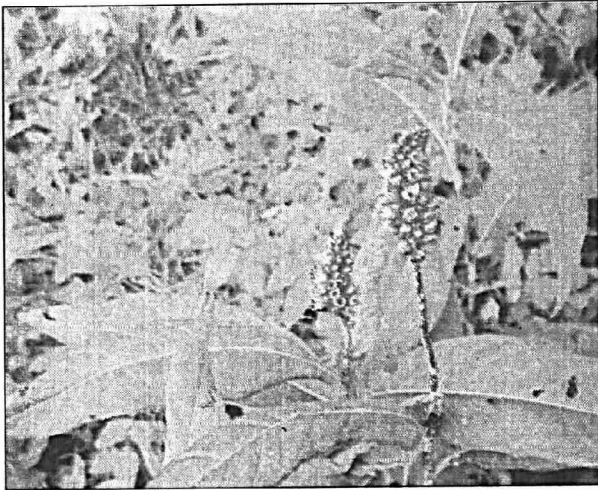
Water Smartweed can be confused with some of our more common pondweeds. However, none of our pondweeds have pink flowers. If no flowers are present you can still differentiate Water Smartweed from our native pondweeds due to the fact that the stem of the plant swells up in the area where the leaves join the stem.

Water Smartweed is a perennial, reproducing by seeds and overwintering rhizomes. New growth emerges from the rhizomes in early summer and flowers develop by midsummer. These flowers form dark, shiny nutlets for seeds. Late in the growing season, foliage dies back and seeds then drop to the sediment. The aquatic form of Water Smartweed is usually found in quiet water of lakes, ponds and backwaters. It grows in a variety of sediment types in water less than six feet deep.

The Langlade County Waterways Association has received a grant from the Wisconsin DNR to help increase public awareness of aquatic species in Langlade County through educational meetings and workshops. The grant also allows for surveying lakes to help determine the lakes' native plant population and if there are any aquatic invasive species present.

If you are a member of a lake association, civic group, or simply a concerned citizen of Langlade County and would like to go on the water together with me and survey a water body for the presence of aquatic invasive species, you can call me at 715-617-1350 or email me at [langladeais@gmail.com](mailto:langladeais@gmail.com).





Water Smartweed is a fascinating plant because it can grow in the water or on the land. This is because it is an ancient hybrid of a terrestrial plant and an aquatic plant. The water level determines which set of genes it will express. The photos show the plant in both its terrestrial and aquatic forms.