

Invasives: Flowering Rush

(*Butomus umbellatus*)

by Lorraine Van Slooten

Flowering rush, also known as grassy rush and water gladiolus, is a native of central Asia and Europe. It was brought to eastern North America in the early 1900s as an ornamental water garden plant, escaped cultivation and is now growing in the northern United States from Maine to Washington and in the bordering Canadian provinces.

This aquatic perennial grows to a height of 1-5 ft. with erect stems and narrow pointed leaves that are triangular in cross section. Up to 50 rose, pink or white flowers are clustered in umbels at the tops of stalks that are round in cross section. Each flower is $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 in. wide, has 3 petals and 3 sepals and blooms from June to early fall. The plants growing in shallow

water have upright foliage and bloom. Those growing submerged in water up to 10 ft. deep have limp ribbons of floating leaves and do not bloom. Flowering rush grows from rhizomes that disperse small fragments which can grow to form new colonies. Small bulblets (bulbils) grow



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on the rhizomes and at the base of the flower stalks. The plants can reproduce by seed, but most often they reproduce vegetatively by rhizome fragments or the bulbils. Even minor disturbances like flowing water, passing boats, waves or waterfowl can help spread these reproducing elements long distances.

Flowering rush habitat includes lake shores, slow moving streams, river edges, ditches, marshes and wetlands. It grows well in all types of soils from sandy to loamy to heavy clay with acid, alkaline or neutral pH levels. It does need full sun and wet soils to grow and can survive in water depths from shallow to over 10 ft. deep. Fluctuating water levels promote expansion of colonies of flowering rush. As water levels decline, more soil is exposed for its vegetative reproduction. When it establishes and grows prolifically in irrigation ditches, it reduces water flow and distribution and increases maintenance costs. A dense growth can interfere with recreational boating, swimming and fishing in rivers

and lakes as well as out-competing native aquatic plants growing there. It can also affect fish habitats by reducing open water where native fish spawn or, conversely, providing vegetative cover for invasive fish.

Prevention, early detection and rapid eradication are the best management options for controlling flowering rush. Any aquatic plant debris on boats, boat motors, trailers, fishing equipment and in boat bilges should be disposed of away from any waterways or wetlands. Hand digging may be an option for small infestations in shallow water, but as many rhizomes and bulbils as possible must be carefully removed. Repeated digging will probably be needed. Using an herbicide is difficult since it tends to wash away from the plant's narrow



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leaves. Also, no herbicide is selective for flowering rush so one must be very careful not to damage other wetland plants. Cultural control may be possible since flowering rush seems to invade areas with dense existing vegetation more slowly than it invades areas with little or no aquatic vegetation. In an effort to impede its spread, native sedges, rushes or reeds can be thickly planted in areas where flowering rush may invade.



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