

This Month



SEA LETTUCE

Colloquial Nicknames: Sea Lettuce
Scientific name: *ULVA LACTUCA*



Field Markings: Green seaweed, sheetlike in appearance. Can be white or black when dry.
Size: Ranges from 6 inches to 2 feet in diameter.
Habitat: Estuaries, high and low intertidal zones
Seasonal Appearance: Year-round, with large blooms in the summer.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

Sea lettuce is a bright green algae composed of lobed, ruffle-edged leaves that are coarse and sheetlike, resembling a leaf of lettuce. The leaves may appear flat, then, broad and are often rounded or oval, typically perforated with holes of various sizes.

Almost no stalk exists at the point of attachment, and no true roots are present. Sea lettuce may be found attached to rocks and shells by a holdfast, but it is usually free floating.

Among the most familiar of shallow water seaweeds, sea lettuce is usually found in areas of exposed rock and in stagnant tide pools. It has also been recorded at depths of 75 feet or more. Sea lettuce grows in both high and low intertidal zones and marshes throughout the year. When dried by the sun, its color can range from white to black.



RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Tolerant of nutrient loadings that would suffocate many other aquatic plants, sea lettuce can actually thrive in moderate levels of nutrient pollution. Large volumes of sea lettuce often indicate high levels of pollution. Growth is also stimulated by the presence of other pollutants and is often found in areas where sewage runoff is heavy.

As a result, sea lettuce is used as an indicator species to monitor pollution trends. The density and location of this algae often indicates the presence of high amounts of nutrients. In areas where there is a high concentration or "bloom" of sea lettuce, sunlight is unable to reach other submerged vegetation (such as eelgrass), preventing photosynthesis and often killing the vegetation below.

When sea lettuce dies, bacteria feeding on the decomposing sea lettuce use up a tremendous amount of oxygen in the water. This, in turn, depletes the oxygen available to other species, suffocating or driving them away.

Masses of sea lettuce can hamper swimmers and foul lines and fishing nets, but it does provide a home to

some invertebrates, such as amphipods.

Like lettuce grown on land, it can be used in salads and soups. Sea lettuce is also used to make ice cream and medicine.

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