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NATURE NOW

By Lydia King Frehse
Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

Smallest Flowering Plant Is Duckweed

Conspicuous on any spring trip, duckweed is a green plant-mass floating on the surface of stagnant ponds, ditches and slow running streams. Dip your hand into the water and it will come up covered with a number of small clinging plant bodies.

Often mistaken for algae these are in truth flowering plants. They are "duckweed" because they are eaten by ducks, especially by the mallard and wood duck. They also provide an easily available and valuable food supply for ducklings since they make a tangled mass which hinders small insect larvae, crustaceans and mollusks.

The duckweed family (Lemnaceae) is a member of the order Arales to which also belongs the Arum family (Araceae). The order is remarkable because in the Arum family we find plants producing the largest flower in the plant kingdom while in the duckweed family are the smallest flowering plants.

AMORPHOPHALLUS, an Arum which resembles its cousin Jack-in-the-pulpit, produces its giant flower in the warm humid forests of the East Indies. It springs from a root-stalk as large as a man's head and the gigantic spathe unfolds to form a yellow and purple

streaked vase-like organ which encloses a fifteen foot spadix at the base of which the individual male and female flowers are clustered. This is our largest known flower.

In contrast, among the duckweeds are found the smallest of the flowering plants. There are four genera, widely dispersed throughout the world. Of these, three are found in Michigan, each with several species. One of the most common is Lemna minor, the lesser duckweed. It can be identified by the small one-to-three-nerved single-rooted plant-body, green on both sides. The greater duckweed, Spirodela polyrrhiza, is seven nerved, has 4 to 16 rootlets and is green on top and red underneath.

But the third genus, Wolffia, produces the tiniest plants of all, measuring only .5-1 mm. in length. They are without roots, floating on the water in such dense mats that an estimated 2,000,000 could be counted in a single square yard.

THE LIFE history of the duckweed is an intriguing one for the botanist who classifies the family as primitive aroids which have regressed to a floating water habit. At the break-up of winter's ice, stagnant waters are soon covered with their dense green mats. The plant body is a flattened "frond" or thallus more or less oval in shape and only 1/24 to 1/32 inch in diameter. The plants bloom but rarely, producing naked pistillate and staminate flowers either on the edge or surface of the thallus.

Duckweeds also reproduce vegetatively by division of the plant body into two parts, each becoming a new plant. Thus as the spring advances, multiplication goes on in astronomical numbers until there are thousands of acres of the green mats.

THROUGHOUT our range this swift yearly increase is made possible only through the plant's unusual ability to migrate! Over winter by sinking to the bottom of the water. During the summer, air sacs within the plant body keep it afloat. But when autumn comes, spherical "winter buds" appear, break off and drop to the bottom. These have a few air sacs and are heavily stocked with a winter's food supply of starch which the water-logged buds eat while ice forms overhead killing the surface plant plants.

Rising spring temperatures stimulate the "hibernating" buds, and

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Flowering trees are beautiful anywhere on the property, but you should plant them where they will achieve a maximum effect and serve a definite purpose.

At a corner of the property toward the street is an excellent location, the tree being planted so you can look at it from the front windows of the house, and where neighbors will "exclaim" over its loveliness.

ANOTHER GOOD location is a corner of the house to help, with other shrubs, to frame the house and tie it to the ground in a natural way.

At a driveway entrance is another likely location. Here both they begin to grow new air sacs filled with gas. They are now ready to rise buoyantly in the surface, their spring ascent being followed by a repetition of their previous life pattern.

This annual journey upward, so unusual in plants, is as important to the cycle of the duckweed as is the vertical migration of the spring peeper, the turtle or the woodchuck.

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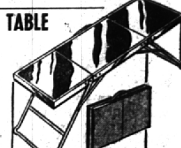
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