

# Wild Side

## Algae

By LYNETTE MCADAMS

Found on every continent, in nearly every ecosystem, the organisms that make up the group we call “algae” are as diverse as they are widespread.

More than 70,000 different species fall within this classification, ranging from the smallest green algae, which is single-celled and microscopic, to the largest brown algae, the giant kelp, which can grow to almost 200 feet.

Able to survive on land but found even more abundantly in water, algae plays a vital role in life on Earth, forming the very foundation of the food chain and producing more than 50 percent of the atmosphere’s oxygen.

Loosely defined as simple plants, most algae contain chlorophyll and use photosynthesis to create the energy they need for growth. Highly

aquatic, they thrive equally in freshwater lakes, saltwater oceans or brackish bays, enduring a range of temperatures and acidities, from polar ice floes to mineral-laden hot springs.

Here in the Columbia-Pacific region, where water seems ubiquitous and daylight hours are lengthening, multiple species of algae are flourishing, showing off a seasonal vigor that will last through the summer and into early autumn, when the sunlight wanes. Until then, look for them in local ponds and lakes, along slow-moving stream beds, and in bird baths, rain barrels and watering troughs.

Some algae don’t require pools of water in order to grow; any moist, out-of-the-way spot will do, including roof tops, wet walls and the shady parts of decks and walkways. Though most live independently or in same-species colonies, some algae form symbiotic relationships with other organ-

isms. Lichens, reef-forming corals and marine sponges, are all examples of the mutually beneficial union that can occur between algae and a willing host.

When waterways become polluted or otherwise out of balance, toxic “blooms” of algae can occur, setting off a negative chain reaction that can be catastrophic to multiple species of animals and plant life, including humans. But the planetary advantages of algae far outweigh the risks: Currently, algae are being cultivated simultaneously for use as a superfood, a highly efficient biofuel and as the primary element in biodegradable plastics. They cleanse the air of carbon dioxide, remove heavy metals from water, aid in the decontamination of sewage and help clean up oil spills.

Perhaps most importantly, algae, in the form of carrageenan, is a key ingredient in most chocolate candy bars.



PHOTO BY LYNETTE MCADAMS

Our frequently damp coastline is the perfect environment for algae to thrive. Here, green algae grows on the lee side of a chicken coop in Ocean Park, Washington.

## Beach Books honors Independent Bookstore Day

SEASIDE — To celebrate Independent Bookstore Day on Saturday, April 29, Seaside’s Beach Books will host author Karen Karbo, who will discuss her powerful women’s books from 10 a.m. to noon.

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