

Nature Notes

...By Sharon

Have you been walking along the beach lately and noticed the white stuff in drifts near the high-tide line that looks like dried, fluffy pasta? Well, it is actually dried manatee grass. The picture to the right shows some of the dried manatee grass, along with some turtle grass. Below is some information on major seagrasses that you may see in local waters—and sometimes washed up on shore.



Seagrasses

Seagrasses are not “true” grasses, but are plants evolved from land-based ancestors that adapted to life in water. They are flowering plants that grow submerged in shallow estuarine (brackish) and marine environments. There are sixty species found worldwide, but only **seven** are found in Florida waters. Of the seven species found in Florida's waters, three are most common: turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*), manatee grass (*Syringodium filiforme*), and shoal grass (*Halodule wrightii*),

Turtle grass is the largest and most abundant species found in Florida. Turtle grass meadows are considered to be the mature or “climax” species, existing in an area indefinitely unless environmental conditions change. The plant itself has a deep root and rhizome system and its broad flat leaves can be up to a foot in length and ½ inch wide. Turtle grasses are not tolerant of freshwater or being exposed at low tide for long periods.



Manatee grass often grows among other seagrasses, especially turtle grass, with its thick root and rhizome system forming dense mats on muddy and sandy bottoms. This species is easy to recognize because its leaves are cylindrical like the whiskers of a manatee. The shape of the leaves, which reach up to 20 inches in length, may help protect the plant in strong currents.

Shoal grass is the plant most tolerant of changing conditions and grows in water that is too shallow for most other seagrasses. The plant’s flat, narrow blades grow to maximum lengths of 4-6 inches by 0.1 inch wide, and are tolerant of being exposed at low tide and of freshwater inputs from nearby land areas. Shoal grass bears some resemblance to turtle grass, but has a much narrower blade. Shoal grass is a relatively fast-growing species that colonizes barren sandy areas in quiet waters.

Seagrasses are important for a number of reasons:

- Support recreational and commercial fishing and shellfishing
- Habitat and feeding grounds for endangered manatees and green sea turtles
- Nursery for tiny crustaceans and young fish that find shelter and food there in the early stages of life
- Birds such as pelicans, terns, and wading birds also forage in the grassbeds
- Promote water clarity by trapping sediments
- Roots and rhizomes help stabilize bottom sediments