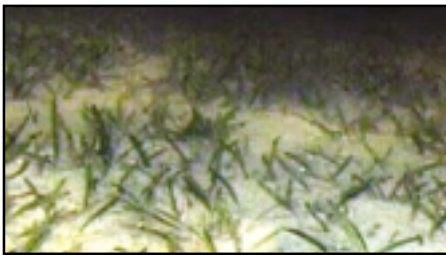


Florida Seagrasses

By Willie Puz

NOAA COASTAL SERVICES CENTER



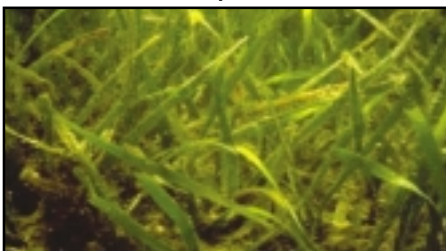
The long, elliptical leaves of Johnson's seagrass (*Halophila johnsonii*) occur in pairs. This seagrass is not only the smallest at 1 to 2 inches in height, but is also the rarest — growing only in southeastern Florida from Sebastian Inlet to Biscayne Bay.

RONALD C. PHILLIPS



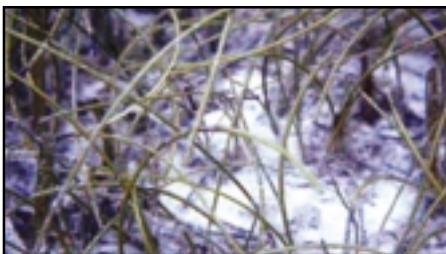
Widgeon grass (*Ruppia maritima*) grows in brackish to freshwater habitats. It has thread-like leaves with a pointed tip. Seagrasses of the *Ruppia* genus occur on all continents of the world and on many islands.

RONALD C. PHILLIPS



Strap-like turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*) leaves are broad, flat and dark green. It can grow as deep as 30 feet if it receives sufficient light.

RONALD C. PHILLIPS



Manatee grass (*Syringodium filiforme*) is a favorite food of its namesake, the Florida Manatee. It's also the only seagrass with cylindrical leaves.

Florida's seven seagrass species represent some of the state's most complex and prolific plant communities: widgeon grass, shoal grass, turtle grass, Johnson's seagrass, paddle-grass, star-grass and manatee grass. With a wide geographic range along the coast of Florida, seagrass beds can be found as far as 20 miles north of Ponce Inlet on the Atlantic coast, then reaching around the peninsula as far west as the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico.

All seagrasses have shoots or leaves that grow from the base to the top. Eventually, the blades die off naturally or are shed as they become fouled or damaged. Like all plants, seagrasses constantly replenish themselves and can grow a whole new plant from as little as a single seagrass cell. But seagrass beds are not static. Portions die off or crop up in new places every few weeks.

Because seagrasses grow most heavily in clear, warm water, beds tend to expand in the summer and contract in cold weather. The grasses flourish in 70- to 90-degree water temperatures, and die off in water colder than 48 degrees Fahrenheit. Short bursts of cold water are tolerable, but sustained water temperatures in the low 40s can cause major die-offs.

Most seagrass beds or meadows consist of more than one species. Often, two or three different kinds of grass occur in a single grassflat, each with a different turnover rate. For instance, Johnson's seagrass plants can grow and die out in a matter of a few weeks as opposed to turtle

grass, which tends to be the hardiest and most resistant to environmental change. A variety of the seagrasses helps maintain a healthy environment for a diverse group of animals dependent on them for habitats and as a food source. One turtle grass community can live for decades while meadows of Johnson's seagrass and/or paddle grass may survive only six to eight months.

Here are some ways boaters and anglers can help protect seagrasses:

- Wear polarized sunglasses. One of the most important preventative of all, polarized sunglasses reduce surface glare to help you spot and avoid dark seagrass beds and animals, such as manatees, underwater.
- Keep track of the tides. Even at high tide, some seagrass beds are vulnerable to vessel strikes. Watch for buoys and stakes marking the edges of grassbeds, and stay clear of them. Keep a complete set of navigation charts. When running in unfamiliar waters, charts can help you avoid running aground. Seagrass beds usually are marked in light green with a "Grs" identifier.
- Operate your boat in marked channels. Channel markers keep you out of shallow water. Should you happen to run aground, stop the engine and tilt it. Then pole or walk your boat to deeper water. Never try to motor your way out.