Individual giant salvinia can grow to the size of a small head of butter lettuce. These plants were taken from Toledo Bend in 1998.

Ornamental plant turns pest

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Giant salvinia was first detected in Toledo Bend and a small area of Bayou Teche south of New Iberia in 1998.

In large part, these infestations were isolated and controlled. Both areas continue to be monitored by state fisheries and agricultural field personnel.

Giant salvinia — Salvinia molesta — is a small, green leafy plant that floats on water surfaces.

Federal agricultural officials believe the it was imported from southern Brazil as an ornamental plant for water gardens. Importation of the plant is prohibited by federal law.

Randy Helton, the biologist whose served on a Salvinia Task Force for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department said Salvinia molesta grows rapidly and, under optimum growing conditions, can double its mass every four days.

Louisiana is a fertile area for giant salvinia. Its smaller cousin, common salvinia, is found on all inland waterways in south Louisiana. State waters get plenty of sunshine, have high nutrient content and a mean temperature above 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

Helton said the plant blankets water surfaces, thereby preventing oxygen and sunlight from getting into the water. It kills fish and other aquatic life forms.

State biologists know giant salvinia reproduces two ways, either through fragmentation or by budding.

Fragmentation occurs when parts of the plant break off and float away from the rest of the colony to regenerate. Buds are reproductive spores located on the root of the plant hanging in the water. The wind generally disperses the plant throughout the same body of water.

Giant and common salvinia die in saltwater. In freshwater waters, herbicides are the only treatment. Biologists are studying the introduction of a small fly native to Brazil to help control giant salvinia.