

Controlling Pond Algae with Straw

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he response to my article last year on the use of straw for algae control in ponds was huge. However, there are still people asking questions who have not heard about this simple solution to a nasty problem. Now that spring is almost here, let us take another look at this topic for those who missed it last year.

Every summer many farm ponds in the region are covered with algae. This not only hampers fishing and swimming, but also affects the water quality of the pond.

Anyone who has a pond knows that trying to control algae can be frustrating. Many have tried dragging it off, coloring the pond water or applying chemicals and weed killers. Some have resorted to algae eating fish.

A simple, inexpensive, environmentally safe method for controlling algae in ponds may have come along.

Extension Water Quality Specialist Dr. Dan Terlizzi wrote about how the British observed that barley straw reduced algae growth in ponds.

This discovery was made by accident when bales of hay accidentally fell into a farm reservoir. The pond grew far less scummy with algae.

This presents pond owners with a practical and inexpensive control for pond algae that fits well with the environmental approach. We may not have to rely on chemical control measures.

Further observations have found that hay does have some inhibitory effect, however, straw is more effective and barley straw is the most effective. It has not been discovered exactly how the hay or straw works to control the algae. Some speculate that a chemical compound is released into the water during the decomposition process and it controls the algae. Researchers at the Aquatic Weeds Research Unit have named this compound "Factor X."

Because Factor X is released from decomposing straw, it is necessary for it to be in the pond a month before algae develops for best results. Straw bales also need to be replaced two or three times during the algae growing season.

Factor X does not appear to kill existing algae in a pond. It is important to put your bales of straw in early. April or early May may be a good time to put them in the pond.

Some experts have suggested that loose straw is more effective than bales, however the bales will obviously be easier to handle and remove after one or two months in the water. Whether using loose or bale straw, you will need some type of system for handling the water-logged straw. An enclosure of poultry wire or plastic mesh has been used successfully in trials.

On the down side, barley straw may be hard to find right now due to the time of year and barley dropped in value as a cash crop last year. If you cannot find barley straw, don't give up, use an alternative. Wheat straw, oat straw or even hay will work. Remember, the original observations were with bales of hay in the pond. Don't wait, use whatever you can get and stock up on barley straw when it is harvested in late June. ■

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