

Hydrocharitaceae

The Hydrocharitaceae is an aquatic plant family found globally in a diverse array of habitats. The majority of species occur in freshwater, with only three of the 17 genera being marine: *Halophila*, *Enhalus* and *Thalassia*. Well-known freshwater genera in this family are *Elodea*, *Hydrocharis* and *Vallisneria*. This is a primarily tropical group of seagrasses but several species of *Halophila* occur in temperate waters.

Among the three marine genera *Halophila* is the most diverse, with 17 species currently recognised. In contrast, *Thalassia* has two species and *Enhalus* only one. There is extreme diversity in morphology among the marine members of this family—from tiny, fragile, round-leaved *Halophila* species, barely 1 cm high, to dense, robust, long-leaved *Enhalus* more than 1 m long.

The relatively high species diversity of *Halophila* may be due to some species having specific habitat preferences and faster growing times than other seagrasses. There is considerable difficulty with the taxonomy of many *Halophila* species due to their morphological plasticity. Here we have adopted a conservative approach to the delimitation of species. One problematic species, *Halophila ovalis*, is described here as a species 'complex', which encompasses a range of previously recognised species and subspecies. *Halophila* species are often commonly known as 'paddleweed' or 'spoon-grass'.

Opposite top: *Halophila ovalis*.

Opposite bottom: *Halophila australis*.