

Connecticut COTTAGES & GARDENS

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MATERIALISM

Water Hyacinth *by Sophie Donelson*

A FAST-GROWING PLANT BECOMES MOD FURNITURE

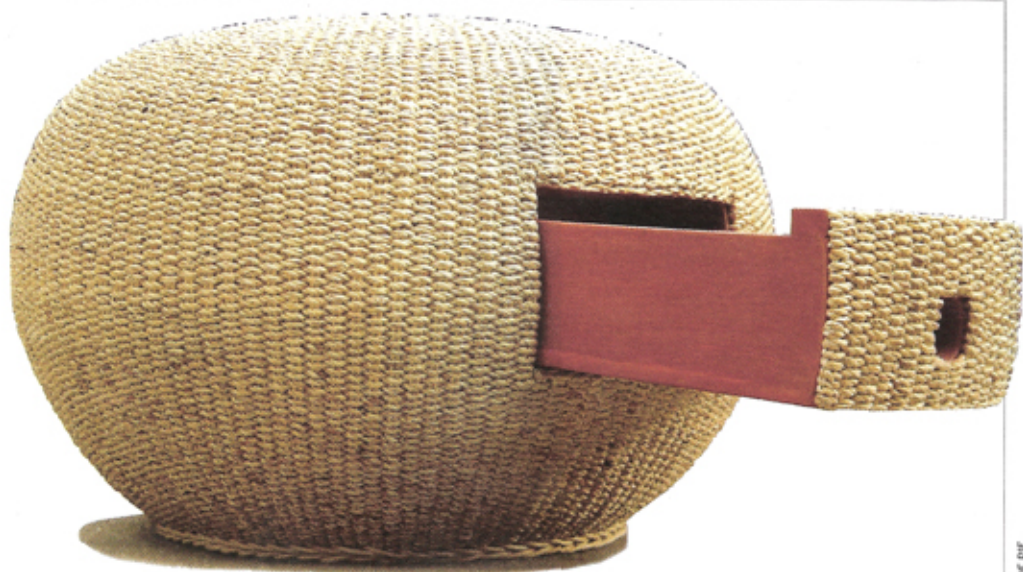
To many, water hyacinth is a twisted, weedy tyrant. In Asia and Florida, the free-floating plant grows with such frenzy—its population can double in as little as 12 days—it's considered an environmental nuisance. But to others, including a host of furniture and product designers worldwide, the plant's relentless productivity is a sensible alternative to using solid wood. Andrew Sribyatta of the Florida-based, eco-friendly furniture company PIE (Project Import Export), is one of them. PIE, which crafts much of its furniture from invasive plants, handpicks the fibers to create curvaceous, modern furniture. "I love this material because it's natural, soft and pleasing to the eye," Sribyatta says. "Wood has certain limits, but water hyacinth is so pliable, which is a very important aspect of its design." Because the fibers are twisted together, the resulting furniture is ultra-durable. "If one piece breaks," he says, "there are 200 left, so it's still a very strong chair." ●



- Water hyacinth is an aquatic plant native to the Amazon basin and is recognized by its long, thin limbs and graceful flowers. It was brought to North America and Asia for its considerable beauty amid a bucolic water garden.

- The plant is most often used for home accessories such as baskets and floor mats. PIE takes it a step further. To make its furniture, craftspeople pick the plants and let the "branches" dry in the sun. Next, the wood is braided, twisted and lacquered to make it stronger. Finally, the wood is wrapped around a frame of any shape and lacquered once more.

- Like similarly invasive plants (kudzu, anyone?), water hyacinth often gets too comfortable in its surroundings, and reproduces rapidly. Regions of five continents (Europe and Antarctica excluded) consider it a threat to eco-diversity.



Dream Weaver | Both the Lunar chair (TOP) and the Round Stool (ABOVE) from PIE are made from handwoven water hyacinth wrapped tightly around a rattan frame. The result is durable furniture with great curves. See Resources.