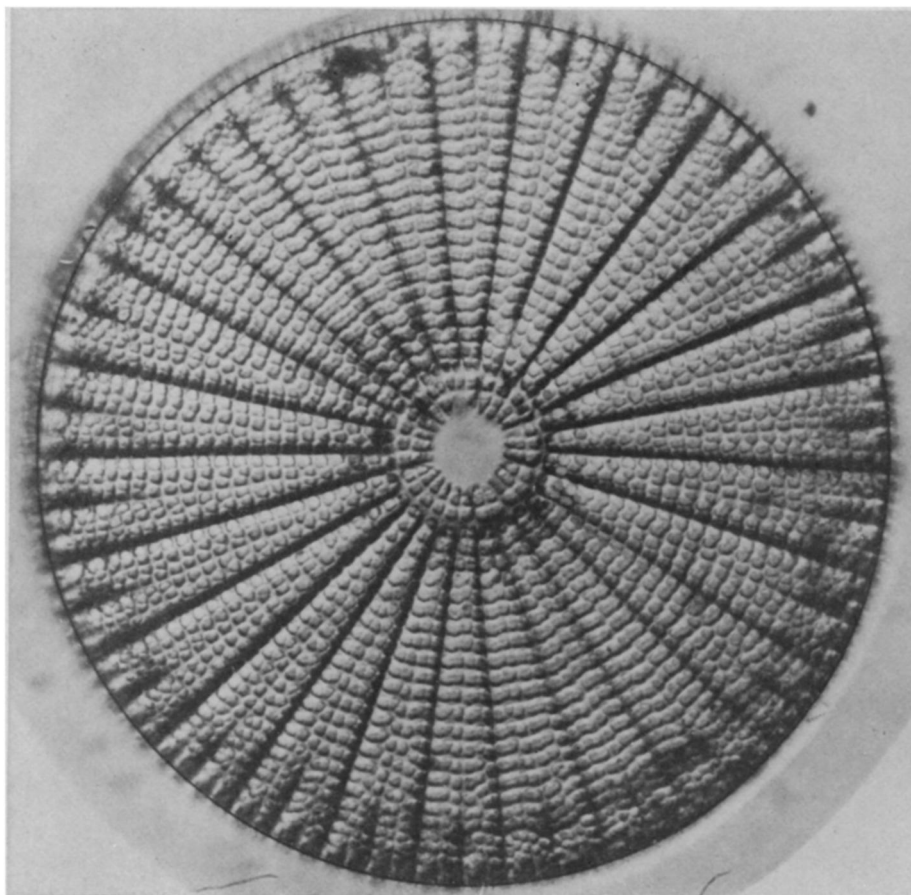


Nature Note



Diatom

An exquisitely designed, microscopic water plant, looking as fragile as a snow crystal, has the toughness and durability to withstand immense pressures underseas for millions of years.

The diatoms, one-celled members of the algae family, existed in great profusion as far back as 28 million years ago—and their descendants are still going strong today.

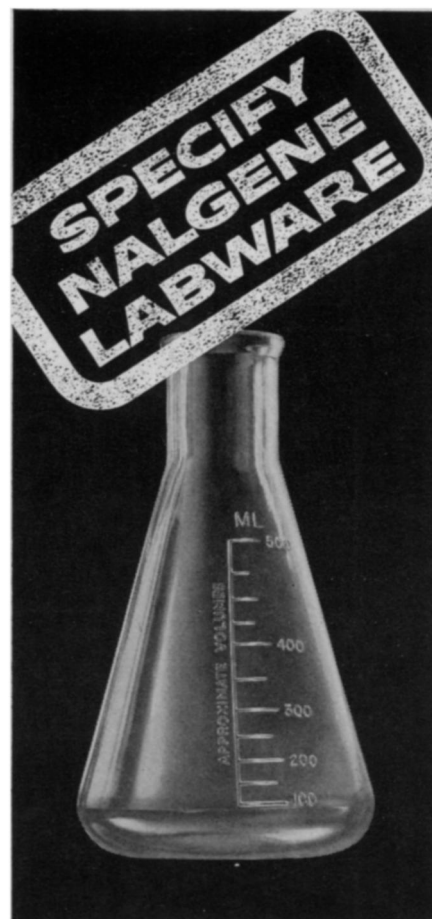
These ornate, free-floating plants have the ability to extract glass-like silica from the seawater and build themselves lacy quartz casings in many shapes and forms—from triangular shapes to those like footballs, ice needles, hourglasses or tiny pill boxes. Each creature has two halves to its single cell, with one-half slightly larger and overlapping the other, somewhat like the parts of a pillbox. They reproduce by splitting and dividing into two daughter halves, each one of which generates another half to fit its shape.

Several thousand species are known today. Many of these tiny cells attach themselves to rocks, logs or other plants, but some are able to move independently by slow rhythmic pulsations—somewhat unusual behavior for plants that manufacture their own food through photosynthesis. Some scientists

group these part-animal, part-plant creatures as protists.

Today's diatoms populate the surface waters in many places throughout the world. They are found in the top 600 feet of the Atlantic and Pacific, and other oceans, in fresh water ponds and rivers, but their greatest numbers are found in the cool Antarctic waters where they are the chief food supply for the huge whales and other sea creatures such as copepods, oysters and young fish.

Those that are not eaten in the never-ending chain of ocean life eventually die, and their tiny skeletons drift gently down through the dark waters to the bottom of the sea. Here, still maintaining their intricate structure, they harden into a light, porous shale called diatomite. Rich beds of this material have been found near the central part of the California Coast Ranges and in areas bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Japan, Russia, Canada, Africa and other nations have found deposits, which are dredged and used for many purposes—as filters for public drinking water and swimming pools, dyes and oils; as insulating materials for boiler furnaces and other industrial equipment; and as fine abrasives for polishes.



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