

SEDGES OF THE ELOISE BUTLER WILDFLOWER GARDEN

By Liz Heck, Garden Naturalist

An inventory of sedges found in the Garden was completed this summer after several seasons of work. Many common favorites were observed, but there were also some surprises, including the discovery of some rare species. If you aren't familiar with sedges, superficially, they resemble grasses and rushes with long, narrow leaves. Yet sedges are distinguished from grasses and rushes by three-sided stems called culms. Their flowers are also structurally different from those of grasses and rushes, and most blooms appear between April and July, before many of the native grasses bloom.

Sedges grow in a variety of habitats nearly worldwide, including wetlands, prairies and woodlands, and were found in each of these environments within the Wildflower Garden, too. The sedge family (Cyperaceae) is quite large, with roughly 5,000 species. Nearly all of the 25 species found in the garden in 2013 are in the *Carex* genus with one species in the *Scirpus* genus. The lifespan of these plants ranges from 10 years to over 150 years. A few of the garden species, such as the bottlebrush sedge (*C. hystericina*) and owl-fruit sedge (*C. stipata*), have disappeared in recent years, perhaps due to the end of their lifespan.

Sedges are often underappreciated perennial plants. Their flowers are extremely subtle and yet, after a bit of study, they become just as fascinating as the most showy bloom. They teach us to look closely, and then again even *more* closely, as each species has its own distinctive personality. Sedges are an important component of the ecosystem, providing habitat and food for wildlife and many other organisms. Deep, dense rhizomatous roots of many species provide excellent erosion control, even in the most challenging environments, such as riverbanks. And their sensitivity to nutrient changes can serve as a clue to adverse changes in their environment.

Exciting finds discovered during the inventory include the soft fox sedge (*C. conjuncta*), which is on the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' list of threatened species; cattail sedge (*C. typhina*), currently on the DNR's list of special concern; and Swan's sedge (*C. swanii*), which is not known in Minnesota and is rare in Wisconsin. One of the sedges with the most character is the Sprengel's sedge (*C. sprengelii*), with its large pendulous blooms shooting out in all directions. (Look for it on a wooded hillside in the fern glen.) For additional information regarding the Garden's sedges, stop by the Garden shelter, where a key to help identify and locate sedges in the Garden is available. ■

—Liz Heck created the sedge inventory in collaboration with Otto Gockman, a biologist with Midwest Natural Resources.

Hairy Sedge, (*C. hirtifolia*) found along the woodland trails. Photo by Liz Heck

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