

Sedge plants gain popularity in gardens

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Sedges are plants of subtle beauty whose place in horticulture is often overlooked. Yet, more and more gardeners are discovering them and realizing their value.

Sedges are flowering plants that resemble grasses. Like the more familiar grasses, sedges have long, narrow leaves with bases that sheathe the stems. Also like grasses, sedges are mostly wind-pollinated. Consequently, both sedges and grasses have inconspicuous flowers that lack petals (which would impede the free flow of pollen if they were present).

Sedges differ from grasses in many ways. In sedges, the stems are usually solid and triangular in cross-section, and the leaf sheaths are fused. Grasses, on the other hand, have hollow stems that are round in cross-section, and the sheaths are split. Many, mostly tiny, aspects of the flowers differ between these two plant families.

The word "sedge" applies to both the sedge family, Cyperaceae, and the largest genus of that family, Carex. In gardening circles, when talk turns to sedges, most often Carex species are the subjects of conversation.

Truly, Carex is a huge genus. At well more than 2,000 species, this genus is one of the world's 10 largest genera of flowering plants, and is the largest genus of plants in North America. Carex species grow on all continents except Antarctica. Also, Carex species exhibit a broad ecological range; sedges occur in such diverse habitats as woodlands, marshes, tundra, and deserts. In nature, sedges dominate some habitats and fill such important roles as preventing erosion and furnishing food and cover for wildlife.

For gardens, sedges provide interesting accents and fillers. Their diversity of growth forms lend a wide range of textures to gardens. Some sedges grow in tight clumps, whereas others spread widely. Some have thread-like leaves, and others have leaves as wide as 2 inches (5 centimeters). Though some

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sedges are very low-growing, others grow more than 3 feet (1 meter) tall. Another aspect of sedges that is so appealing is the color of the foliage.

Different species range from bright green to blue-green to silver to olive. Many sedges are evergreen. So, gardens can benefit from their colors and textures year-round.

Because of the diversity of habitats in which they grow in nature, there's a sedge for virtually any spot in a garden: sunny or shady, wet or dry. As examples, tall wetland clumpers command attention at the edges of ponds. Short woodland spreaders fill in shaded places.

Sedges have more advantages for gardens. Sedges are subject to few diseases, and most are easy to grow. Numerous species are already in the nursery trade, and many more species are becoming available. Currently, most sedge species that are for sale are not native to North America.

Consider buying native species for your garden. By purchasing native, you will avoid the threat of introducing non-native species to our flora, but also you will be growing species that are already adapted to our climate and soils.

Gateway Garden Center in Hockessin (<http://www.gatewaygardens.com/>) has a wide selection of native sedge species for sale, and spring is a good time to plant them.

Besides visiting a nursery that offers a selection of species, another good way to learn about sedges is to peruse a book on garden sedges (usually lumped with ornamental grasses).

"The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes" by Rick Darke (Timber Press, 2007) is a magnificent book with a wealth of information on sedges. Another good option is to visit the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium of Delaware State University. As part of its larger collection of plants, the herbarium has a collection of more than 14,000 preserved specimens of sedges from throughout the world.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6450 (Dr. Robert Naczi) for more information about this article.



Submitted photo
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