

Native Sedges Fit for Gardening By Scott Woodbury

When most gardeners think of sedges, a particular weed comes to mind, yellow nutsedge. It isn't a proper sedge in the genus *Carex*, but a flatsedge in the genus *Cyperus* which mostly consists of spreading species too weedy for gardening. Among *Carex* however, several work well in the garden. Unlike their flatsedge cousin, these garden-worthy species delight gardeners.



Take cedar sedge, *Carex eburnea*, for instance. Its pocket-sized emerald green tufts of hair-like leaves top out at 3 inches. In warm winters it was nearly evergreen, though in normal years it turns tan. It slowly creeps to form into a dense mat in dry, shady places and works nicely with other diminutive shade-lovers like wild sweet William, *Phlox divaricata* and crested iris, *Iris cristata*. There is an interesting YouTube video of this one showing the plant in the wild.

Oak sedge, *Carex albicans*, is gaining popularity thanks to its ease in gardening and the pioneering work of Missouri Wildflowers Nursery. It is a shade to part sun-loving sedge growing 8-10 inches on dry to moist soils. Its arching thread-like foliage surrounded by prairie pussytoes, *Antennaria neglecta*, is a winning combination. If you like this one, you might try the very similar James sedge, *Carex jamesii*, which is slightly evergreen though its leaf tips tend to go tan in summer.

A versatile *Carex* that would grow in most gardens is palm sedge, *Carex muskingumensis*. It tolerates sun or shade, dry or wet. Beginner gardeners can't go wrong with this one. Its two feet tall, long-lived, and provides a fine-textured tropical contrast to broad-leaved plants. In sunny areas mix in a couple yellow wild indigo, *Baptisia sphaerocarpa*, and orange coneflower, *Rudbeckia fulgida*. In the shade, try it with sensitive fern, *Onoclea sensibilis*, and the bold round leaves of wild hydrangea, *Hydrangea arborescens*. It also tolerates rain gardens and tough clay. When planted in mass, palm sedge reduces garden maintenance. It can be cut down once a year in March with a push mower set on high with no need to rake up clippings or for mulching. Two other terrific sedges under two feet for shade include fringed sedge, *Carex crinita* and bur sedge, *Carex grayii*.

Native gardeners have relied heavily on prairie dropseed, *Sporobolus heterolepis*, over the years to create that soft, grassy look that resembles nature. None of the other native grasses perform in the same short, permanent, well-behaved way in full sun. But some sedges do and are as good or better than prairie dropseed, especially in clay or poorly-drained soils. The fox sedges come to mind first, *Carex vulpinoidea* and *Carex*

annectans. They look similar, if not identical, to prairie dropseed though they bloom in spring with no intense fragrance. Let's face it, you either love the smell of prairie dropseed in bloom or you hate it.

If you are looking for a low-maintenance native groundcover to use instead of invasive wintercreeper, English ivy, periwinkle, or liriopse, look no further. Gold sedge, *Carex aureolensis*, at 10 inches, is a great alternative. Tolerant of sun and shade, this creeping sedge quickly fills into a solid mat, eliminating most weeds and the need to mulch. Simply mow in March as you would liriopse and walk away. Scatter in a few companion plants like seedbox, *Ludwigia alternifolia*, or slender mountain mint, *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*, for contrast. Brown sedge, *Carex buxbaumii*, and field sedge, *Carex praegracilis*, are two other top-performing alternative groundcovers.

All of the plants mentioned will be available at the Shaw Wildflower Market at Shaw Nature Reserve, Gray Summit, MO. Nurseries interested in attaining stock material of *Carex* are encouraged to contact the author at scott.woodbury@mobot.org.

Spring 2012