

Notable Natives

Common oak sedge

Sedges belong to a family of grass-like plants and include numerous species that are challenging to identify. One of their distinguishing characteristics is the triangular shape of the main stem. One frequently hears the “sedges have edges” quote as a way to identify them.

The fine-textured *Carex pensylvanica*, common oak or penn sedge, is likely the most well-known sedge in this area and is prevalent in dry oak savannas, primarily on slopes. The leaves are about 1/8" wide and appear to be less than one foot tall. They have a soft, arching habit.

This sedge is one of the earliest-blooming species in the spring and is monoecious, having both male and female reproductive parts on a single plant. Its reproductive spikelets rise above the foliage. The sedge has a creeping habit and spreads largely by rhizomes. (It is difficult to start from seed.) A mature colony of common oak sedge will form a ground cover that looks like green waves in dry shade. Although the individual leaves of the sedge may grow to a length of two feet over the growing season, the height of the plants will remain about eight inches due to the gentle arching of the leaves.

For people who utilize burns as a restoration method in the woods, this sedge provides some fuel for the burn (the main fuel being oak leaves). It is an important matrix plant in our oak woods. At home it makes a good lawn substitute in shady places with little foot traffic, needing only a late winter mowing to maintain it as lawn. It is deer resistant and helps control erosion.



Penn sedge under bur oak. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

Try *C. pensylvanica* under the oaks on your property. The trees love it since it won't compete for rain water as does lawn grass. It will hold the soil and grow beautifully and kindly with early native wildflowers interspersed between the plants.

— Carol Rice