



Sedges, a Garden Workhorse

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Sedges (*Carex* spp.) usually aren't the first group of plants that we think of when we imagine all of the wonderful things we want to see in our gardens. While flowers and colorful foliage are often our foremost thoughts, useful, yet no less beautiful, plants like sedges have a lot to offer.

Sedges, of which there are over 2,000 species native throughout the world, play an important role both in our landscapes and in the larger ecosystem. As stewards of the natural environment, we value sedges for their ability to act as host plants for many species of Lepidoptera (butterflies, moths, and skippers). As gardeners, we value their low maintenance and grass-like foliage that can function as green negative space to unify a garden design while also providing textural interest.

Although there are species that grow as much as four feet tall, many are much shorter and can

be used as groundcovers. In fact one of the best attributes of *Carex* is their ability to function as a living, green mulch. They not only prevent weeds from growing but they also eliminate the need for yearly applications of wood mulch. Groundcovering species can even be taken a step further and used as a lawn alternative. This works especially well in shady areas where turf grasses are often difficult to grow. Such "lawns" require much less maintenance since they don't need to be watered, fertilized, or even mowed on a regular basis.

Sedges have an understated beauty that, combined with their adaptability, design utility and ecological value, places them on the cusp of being one of our most celebrated groups of native plants. A couple of favorite species to consider adding to your garden are featured on the opposite page.

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Carex grayi
GRAY'S SEDGE

Gray's sedge has strappy, 1/2" wide leaves that grow 1.5-3' tall and form a dense clump that expands slowly over time. This sedge is easily recognized by its interesting seed heads that are fused together, forming a spiny sphere that some people liken to a medieval mace. Gray's sedge grows well in normal to wet garden soils in full sun or partial shade. The plants will tolerate full shade as well, though they may not be as sturdy.

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Carex laxiculmus
SPREADING SEDGE

Spreading sedge grows 6-12" tall and is loved by gardeners for its bluish colored foliage. Although its common name is spreading sedge, *Carex laxiculmis* is a clump-forming species, but it can spread by seed in the garden. Spreading sedge prefers full to partial shade and a moist garden soil.

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Carex pensylvanica
PENNSYLVANIA SEDGE

Pennsylvania sedge is one of the most popular native sedges thanks to its gracefully arching, fine-textured foliage. This 6" tall sedge spreads by rhizomes to form a dense groundcover in moist, shady sites. It can substitute for turf grass in the proper conditions. Pennsylvania sedge can handle full sun once established. It can brown in the summer but is easily rejuvenated by mowing the tips in late summer or early spring.

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Carex plantaginea
PLAINTAIN-LEAF SEDGE

Plantain-leaf sedge grows less than 1' tall, prefers shade to partial shade and is adaptable to both moist and dry soil. It's sometimes referred to as the seersucker sedge due to its wide, pleated leaf blades. This sedge is eye-catching thanks to its lighter, almost lime-green foliage. In April, dark flower spikes rise above the foliage and look particularly attractive against the light colored leaves. Use it in mass for the most attractive floral display.

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