

# Sedges for the Landscape

*Sedges have edges, rushes are round, grasses have nodes from their tips to the ground.*

by Heather Prince

Sedges seem to be creeping into our landscape palettes, designs, and gardens as we discover their versatility and utility as ground covering plants. Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, Delaware recently released their *Carex for the Mid-Atlantic Region* research report. This in-depth report summarizes the findings of their *Carex* trial where they grew 65 species and 5 cultivars of sedges in both sun and shade to test their adaptability. The reports from Mt. Cuba, like the Chicago Botanic Garden Plant Evaluation Program, provide the green industry and homeowners with science-based rigorously tested results so that we can make good choices for our designs and gardens.

You may have seen more and more *Carex*, especially native species, become demanded by municipalities, commercial sites, and residential projects as the naturalistic design trend becomes more rooted in our horticulture vocabulary. There is a sedge for almost any situation that will cover the ground, hold soil, and provide a beautiful grassy texture. From clients seeking a meadow-like approach to those restoring woodlands and wetlands, sedges can add lovely textural grace notes and help create a sense of Midwestern place.

## Finding a place for your sedge desire

Sedges blend easily with both native and ornamental plantings, often slowly forming colonies and providing the base layer of a planting. As cool season plants, they green up early in the spring, sometimes blooming before their full growth is achieved. You'll find all sorts of delicate flower habits from nodding clustered strands to fuzzy blonde blossoms to tiny starry flowers tossed like fairy confetti. Their dried seedheads may also be interesting and ornamental. Most of our sedges have degrees of fine narrow foliage that gently drapes as a tufted mound, although some are denser or have wider blades.

Sedges should be left to dry over the winter as they provide important leaf litter for overwintering insects. They can be a nice 'soft landing' under trees to encourage our many species of pupating butterflies and moths that require shelter during the winter before emerging in spring. Sedges are also larval hosts to several species of butterflies and moths, while birds enjoy the seeds. You may give *Carex* a light string trim in late winter, but if the design allows, leave the blades as mulch. Songbirds will pick dried foliage for nesting materials, increasing the ecological functions of your planting.

## Tracking down the useful sedge

The Mt. Cuba report readily admits that their choices may not be easily available. Of their top 15 selections, we chose 10 that are typically available from Midwestern growers, although you may need to seek out ILCA's native plant partners for a good selection. Book these popular plants early! Growers report their crops may already be allocated for spring, with more coming online for summer and fall plantings.

For Mt. Cuba's four-year *Carex* trial, plants were planted in 2017 with supplemental water only the first year. Plants were given no fertilizer and one late winter cut back. They were grown in average, medium-moisture, clay-loam soils with a pH of 6.5. These are listed in order of top performance, the highest rated being first in the list. You can find the complete report at <https://mtcubacenter.org/trials/carex-for-the-mid-atlantic-region/>



## *Carex bromoides* – common brome sedge

Size: 12 inches high by 20 inches wide

Sun: full sun to part shade

Soil: requires moist to wet soil and tolerates periods of inundation

Flower: Small clouds of golden yellow fuzzy flowers appear in April

Foliage: Thin, delicate bright green blades, this is a clumping sedge that slowly expands.

Notes: This can be an excellent swale, rain garden or sump pump outlet choice as it thrives in wet conditions but stays short and wide. Pair with other water lovers like cardinal flower, blue lobelia, blue flag, and rose mallow. Enrique



Rodriguez, Production Foreman for the Midwest Natural Garden nursery at Midwest Groundcovers reports, “Although easy to grow from seed, it is not a heavy seed producer. I find it takes 6 to 8 weeks from germination to a full plug. An endangered species in Illinois, it does well in full sun to full shade for us. It’s a great, versatile *Carex* for the landscape.” Brent Horvath, President of Intrinsic Perennials agrees. “It’s one of my favorites. It’s easy to propagate, the heavy bloom in the spring is showy, and it’s adaptable. A clumping form with a thin blade of light green color, it is a nice contrast to most other *Carex*.”

***Carex haydenii* – Hayden’s sedge**

Size: 12 to 18 inches high and wide  
 Sun: full sun to full shade  
 Soil: average to wet soils; requires moisture in full sun  
 Flower: rusty brown and silver spikelets are held very upright on slender stems, maturing to fat wheat-like seedheads  
 Foliage: fine-textured narrow green leaves  
 Notes: This water-lover is an excellent choice for wet, shady areas and clients looking for a naturalistic texture. Try it as a softening texture around pond and stream edges.



***Carex stricta* – upright or tussock sedge**

Size: 1 to 3 feet tall and 2 feet wide  
 Sun: full sun to part shade  
 Soil: moist to wet soils; tolerates standing water  
 Flower: brown and silver fluffy spikelets in early spring mature into stacked cylindrical brown nutlets.  
 Foliage: Graceful, deep green blades remain attractive all summer. Old foliage eventually forms a dense upright clump that wildlife seeks out for refuge.  
 Notes: In optimal conditions, tussock sedge can aggressively spread. This is a great choice for the edges of ponds and wetlands where it can be a graceful transition from water’s edge to planting beds. Rodriguez finds, “it’s best propagated vegetatively. We’ve found it thrives in consistently wet soil and it is doing well planted around one of our irrigation ponds in part shade.”



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## ***Carex emoryi* – Emory’s sedge**

Size: 1 to 3 feet and spreading  
Sun: full sun to part shade  
Soil: moist to wet soils; standing water

Flower: Fluffy white cylindrical flowers mature into long spiky nutlets.

Foliage: Mid-green upright blades will slightly nod at the tips.

Notes: This is a fast-growing aggressive wetland sedge. If you need to fill an area quickly, this can be a good choice. Excellent in retention areas to hold soil and prevent erosion. “This one is very hard to grow as it isn’t a heavy seed producer and not a great grower after vegetative propagation,” commented Rodriguez. “It’s doing quite well on a pond edge in part shade.”



## ***Carex pensylvanica* – Pennsylvania sedge**

Size: 6 to 8 inches high and wide  
Sun: full sun to full shade  
Soil: any

Flower: Small fluffy butter yellow flowers are held above newly green shoots in spring.

Foliage: Very fine mid-green leaves grow in clumps, eventually expanding to fill an area.

Notes: This polite spreader easily weaves in between other plants to fill in and provide a green ground layer. The ‘Straw Hat’ cultivar from Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Perennials is slower growing and features a larger, showier flower. Plant this one at the front of the border to take advantage of its cheerful spring flowers. Ben French, Vice President of Propagation and Product Development at Johnson’s Nursery is quite fond of this sedge. “Penn sedge, as we colloquially call this plant, is a wonderful full shade option in our area. It seems like it allows for other interesting plants to live within its territory, leaving spaces for trilliums, bloodroot, trout lily, and other spring ephemerals. It does have a mini pop of tannish yellow in its flowering stalk in mid-spring, which is close to inconspicuous, but nifty when spotted. The soft ‘green grass’ look of this sedge is hard to beat.”



## ***Carex sprengelii* – long-beaked sedge**

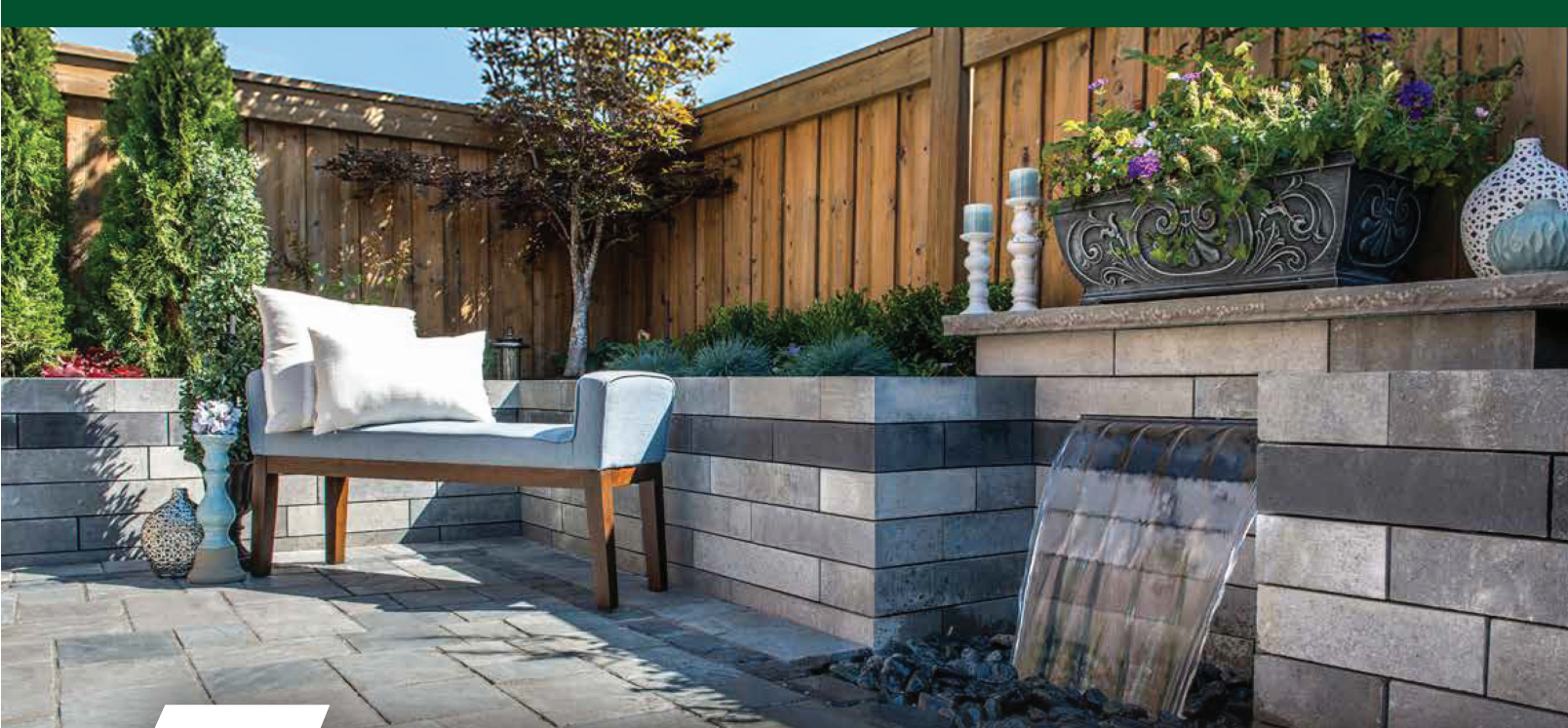
Size: 1 to 2 feet high and wide  
Sun: part shade  
Soil: average to moist soils

Flower: Lovely long nodding wheat-like inflorescences in spring are held above foliage adding movement and texture.

Foliage: Upright fountain of mid-sized green blades in spring may flop after flowering. However, a light trim will stimulate a fresh flush of lush green foliage.

Notes: A clumping sedge, try this one with spring bulbs for a magical meadow-like display. “This is a great sedge for landscapes,” said Rodriguez. “It’s one of the earlier *Carex* to green up in the spring. We’ve found it to be very vigorous in the rich organic soils of our *Carex* classroom in full shade under established oaks.”





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## ***Carex albicans* – white-tinge sedge**

Size: 15 to 20 inches high and wide

Sun: full sun to full shade, but happiest with some shade

Soil: average to dry soils

Flower: delicate brown and white flowers in May

Foliage: Thin, delicate blades of medium green in small clumps that may be semi-evergreen.

Notes: White-tinge sedge is a sedge of the woodlands and therefore tolerates dry shade quite nicely. Interplant this with epimedium, Christmas fern, and Solomon's seal for a layered forest garden.



## ***Carex jamesii* – James's sedge**

Size: 6 to 8 inches high and wide

Sun: part shade to full shade

Soil: dry to average to moist well-drained soils; very adaptable

Flower: Cute little clusters of light green flowers in early spring.

Foliage: Fresh emerald-green foliage in spring that matures to a tidy semi-evergreen clump.

Notes: The trials found this to be one of the most ornamental sedges due to its tidy nature and deep green spring foliage. "This one thrives in cooler weather and emerges early in the season," noted Rodriguez. "It does, however, brown out in the summer when it gets really hot." Try interplanting it at the front of the border with small-scale hostas, Jacob's ladder, and wild geranium.



## ***Carex crinita* – fringed sedge**

Size: 2 to 3 feet high and 1 to 2 feet wide

Sun: full sun to part shade

Soil: average to wet soils to standing water

Flower: Tall, elegant, nodding, pendulous spikelets that mature to brown seedheads that persist all season.

Foliage: Substantial clumps of blue-green foliage in spring may be evergreen in optimal conditions.

Notes: This sedge can be a good choice to add sophisticated texture to the edge of a pond or wetland. It also can adapt to average soils and weave between larger coarser perennial forbs. "More people should know about this sedge," commented Rodriguez. "It's easy to grow with heavy seed production and good germination. A little on the taller side, the coarse texture is nice and it will take full sun."





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## The State of Natives —

### *Carex plantaginea* – seersucker sedge

Size: 6 to 8 inches high and 12 to 18 inches wide

Sun: part shade to full shade

Soil: dry to average to moist well-drained; very adaptable

Flower: Dark brown inflorescences arise from the base in early spring on long thin upright stems, giving it almost an appearance of grassy fireworks.

Foliage: Broad, strappy light green leaves pucker along the length, giving it its common name.

Notes: This semi-evergreen sedge is adaptable to a variety of conditions.

Its highly ornamental foliage is slow to emerge in the spring, so avoid trimming. “*Carex plantaginea* is hard and slow to propagate,” finds Horvath, “but once planted in the garden, it seems to be mostly evergreen and trouble-free.” This can be a very nice front of the shade border plant that blends easily with spring bulbs and native ephemerals. 🌿



# Growing Carex: Notes from Production Growers

by Heather Prince

With the release of the Mt. Cuba Center report on Carex, many of our growers and suppliers have been deluged with requests for this adaptable genus of plants. We reached out to a number of ILCA member growers for their thoughts on the challenges and rewards of growing sedges.

Overall, growers use a mix of seed and divisions to propagate sedges. It can be a tricky crop to grow since it puts on growth in early spring and slows down in the heat of summer. There is high demand for sedges in both the ecological restoration arena and for ornamental plantings.

“At Pizzo Native Plant Nursery we currently grow 61 species of Carex and we attempt to grow all of them from seed,” commented **Kyle Banas, Nursery Manager and Head Grower**. “We sometimes rely on vegetative propagation to increase numbers, but we strive to maintain genetic diversity within our crops through seed propagation. The germination protocols on sedges are just as varied as their habitat in which they grow. We have over 20 different propagation protocols for Carex species alone and we’re refining those methods every year.”

**Jason Fritz, Associate, Ecology, Nursery Business Development Manager for Stantec** agrees that sedges are an important component of their plant list. “As a native restoration nursery, we are constantly looking to increase our offerings to meet the needs of the habitat restoration market. Of the Mt. Cuba list, we currently have six species in cultivation. We grow a limited quantity of Carex due to the challenges of growing from division or getting good germination from the

ones that are seed propagated. It usually takes two to three years to figure out the right propagation techniques and care to get a profitable production run. Some of the species on the Mt. Cuba report are hard to find on the market for a reason. It will take time to build up division stock and/or source seed before we can consider offering them. Sedges definitely need to be used in more landscapes. Here at Stantec, we already have 30+ Carex species in production that can be excellent choices for projects.”

**Midwest Groundcovers**, through their Midwest Natural Garden nursery, grows about 40 species of sedges, both native and cultivars. Their production foreman, Enrique Rodriguez, commented on the specific nature of working with the genus. “All sedges are cool season, meaning for vegetative propagation, it has to be done in the spring and the fall – they do not actively grow very much in the summer months. The window to propagate is small, so you have to really pay attention to temperature changes. That can cause availability challenges as well, since the propagation window is so specific and growing from seed is so inconsistent. Also, sedges are quite promiscuous and cross very easily with each other. So, we pay close attention to that – as we have seen it happen before.”

**Mariani Plants** grows several ornamental sedges as well as *Carex pensylvanica*. Krystal Fogel, Production Manager, reports that sedges have their own set of challenges to produce. “Our experiences with *Carex pensylvanica* and sedges  
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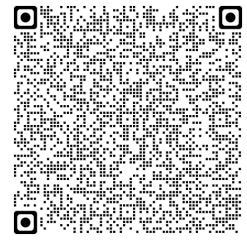
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