Sedges have Edges

The last month has been fairly dry in northeastern Ohio. Many lawns have turned brown, but in wetter spots, such as ditches or even low spots in lawns, spikes of greenish yellow grass-like plants have become more obvious. Their bright green color stands in contrast to the surrounding brown grasses. Many of these plants are sedges, members of the family Cyperaceae.

Sedges have a growth form similar to grasses. They have slender blade-like leaves that arise in clumps and thus resemble many grasses. Sedges however have triangular stems, in contrast to the round stems of grasses. Sedge stems are also solid and grass stems are hollow. Another somewhat less common group of grass-like plants is the rushes. Rushes usually have round stems. Students who are learning about plants sometimes rely on this simple phrase to help them distinguish among these three groups of grass-like plants: “Sedges have edges, rushes are round, and grasses are hollow right up from the ground.”

Sedges are an extremely diverse group of plants with more than 5000 species worldwide, and distinguishing among these species can be a very difficult task. Sedges include weedy species, species with forage value, especially for wildlife, and recently people have been planting sedges for their ornamental value. A Google search for sedges returned an article on how to eradicate sedges from a lawn alongside an article about how to cultivate sedges in a residential landscape.

While most sedge species are found in the tropical and warm temperature regions, the relatively few arctic and alpine species often are the dominant ground cover in polar regions or at high altitude, regions collectively known as tundra. There the sedges are often a major part of the diet of grazers such as caribou or elk. There are sedges with economic and cultural significance. Papyrus is a sedge that was used by the early Egyptians to create a paper-like writing material. Today, some plant nurseries are selecting, propagating and selling sedges for the ornamental appeal.

The individual flowers of a sedge are small and fairly simple and are therefore called florets. Florets may be male, producing pollen, or female, producing eggs and ultimately seeds. The florets occur in clusters that are called inflorescences. In many species the inflorescence includes both male and female florets. The seeds that are produced are small and hard, but are very numerous.

Sedges are mostly perennial, but their above-ground portions die back to the ground during the winter in temperate and polar regions. Some species have small underground tubers that store energy for the initiation of growth the following spring. In a very few species the tubers are large enough to eat, but it would require a lot of effort to gather and clean enough tubers to sustain a human.

Sedges often are ignored. They are lumped in with grasses or treated as unwanted weeds. Take a look around the next few weeks and see if you can find a sedge. Look closely at the inflorescence and admire the intricacy at the small scale. Also look for the triangular stem to make sure you have a sedge!

PHOTO

The floral structure of a flatsedge (Cyperus strigosus) blooming along a street in Alliance, Ohio in early September. The bristly clusters that look like a bottle brush are composed of dozens of separate flowers that are each producing a single seed.

(Photo by C McIaugherty)