

Sedges, rushes and grasses are important to the natural world, but hard to tell apart

Sedges have edges,
Rushes are round,
Grasses have nodes
all the way to the ground.

This catchy rhyme has aided many naturalists in identifying different types of grass-like plants. Rushes, sedges and many varieties of grasses are difficult to tell apart in the wild. For the most part, sedges have triangular stems (edges) with leaves arranged in groups of three. Even though many folks identify sedges as a wetland plant, they can be found just about anywhere. Rushes usually have cylindrical, hollow stems. Grasses are technically graminoids, and generally sport narrow leaves growing from the base.

Sedges are flowering monocot plants. The scientific name is *Cyperaceae*, which is a very large family with over 5,000 species. Sedges can be found in many diverse plant communities and can grow in poor soils. Seed heads are located at the end of the stem. Their root systems are fibrous and some produce rhizomes and tubers.

Because of their hardy attributes, sedges compete with other vegetation in the area and are often considered weeds. Nut sedge is an example of an aggressive, fast growing plant and is often found in yards.

Florida is home to many varieties of sedges. *Rhynchospora colorata*, or white-topped sedge is a native to Florida. It is a hardy plant which can survive drought or live in wet environments. It grows in disturbed areas such as ditches and roadsides. This particular sedge is pollinated by insects and the white flowers are quite attractive.

Another, more well-known sedge is saw- grass. This particular variety of sedge grows in thick stands that usually cover a large area. The spiny, sharp, serrated leaf blades give rise to its name and the stems that grow underground allow the plant to grow to the point that it is impenetrable in many cases. The Everglades is home to an abundance of this sedge and while humans may find it hazardous to navigate, many species of wildlife depend on the plant for food and shelter. Ducks and geese eat the seeds for energy and the thick grass-like plant provides cover and nesting for many species of reptiles, amphibians, birds and insects.

Rushes may be found on dry ground or in water. Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*) is a very common species of *Juncus*. The pale green, leafless, cylindrical stems, which are filled with pith, are found in colonies of clumps or by themselves as a single clump. Soft Rush grows to be from three to five feet tall in fresh and salt water. The plant is important as a food source, nesting site and cover may birds and other wildlife. The bloom it sports is open and branched containing anywhere from 30 to 100 small flowers. The blooms are greenish-brown.

Black needlerush is another true rush that is found in a wide variety of soils, from sand to clay. This particular rush spreads by rhizomes and seeds. However the seeds must have sunlight to germinate. Needlerush spreads by rhizomes, but it also drops seeds every year. The seeds will germinate if they have access to sunlight. This rush has a uniquely shaped leaves with have very sharp tips – giving them their needle like name. It is grayish-green in color with a black hue. It forms dense stands and is used in estuary restoration because of its hardiness in salt and brackish water.

Grasses in nature are so diverse, that it is extremely difficult to tell them apart. Some grasses are very common such as maidencane (*Panicum hemitomon*). This grass forms large stands in water on land. It is similar in appearance to some other grasses, but this native species is very important in the natural world. It provides food, nesting and protection for many critters that reside nearby. Maidencane sports stems that can reach lengths of six feet. The leaves are narrow and erect and may be folded or flat. The tiny flowers are green in color and grow near the branches.

A bit more flashy, giant foxtail (*Setaria magna*) is so called because of its large spikey, foxtail shaped bloom. It generally grows in swamps or may be found in disturbed areas that are wet. This showy grass blooms all year round. Giant foxtail is a very large grass with stems up to twelve feet tall. The seeds from the giant foxtail grass are a valuable source of food for wildlife.

It just goes to show, whether a sedge, rush or grass, there is so much diversity in nature. Sometimes it's hard even for the experts to tell them apart!