

# **A Sedge By Another Name ... Is Confusing**

MICHAEL CURTO and DAVID FROSS

The search for more water sensible surrogates for traditional turf grasses has focused attention on some long overlooked native sedges of the genus *Carex* that continue to gain popularity and presence in West Coast gardens. Of particular value for lush swards, play areas, dog runs, bank stabilization, oak understory, pond margins, and retention basins is a vigorously rhizomatous sedge complex presently sold as Dune Sedge, Sand-Dune Sedge, California Meadow Sedge, or Western Meadow Sedge. Over the past decade, the horticultural merit of this sedge complex became clear while the misapplication of botanical and vernacular names for it grew increasingly blurred.

## **A Difficult Genus**

As with the true grasses, sedges produce small, highly reduced flowers within bracts representing modified leaves or other accessory structures. The relatively small sized, indistinct, and uniquely named inflorescence parts make grass and sedge identification especially challenging. A dissecting microscope, mature plant material, herbarium specimens, and taxonomic references are needed for confident identifications. Even with such, many trained botanists turn a blind eye or appear pained when faced with identifying an unfamiliar grass or sedge. Correct identification is made more difficult by the extremely narrow species concepts delimited in taxonomic treatments. The genus *Carex* includes about 2000 species worldwide, the largest number within any vascular plant genus. About 200 native *Carex* species inhabit the Pacific States from

sea level to subalpine, coastal dunes to foothill woodlands, montane meadows to desert washes. Given the nature of the genus, it is no surprise to find misidentifications and misapplications of names among horticultural material.

## **Two Species Inhabit Pacific Coast Dunes**

Plants presently offered as Dune Sedge or California Meadow Sedge belong to a sedge complex treated as two separate species by botanists for nearly 120 years. *Carex praegracilis* was named in 1884 by William Boott, *Carex* authority at Boston, based on material collected near San Diego, California. In 1888, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Jr, renowned Cornell botanist and horticulturist, named *Carex pansa* from material collected near the mouth of the Columbia River at Ilwaco, Washington and along coastal Clatsop County, Oregon.

These details are significant for two reasons. First, the name *Carex praegracilis* holds nomenclatural priority. Second, these collections represent geographical and morphological extremes within the complex making the recognition of two species more understandable.

*Carex praegracilis* is among the most geographically widespread sedges, ranging throughout much of North America except for extreme northeastern Canada and the southeastern United States. With a high tolerance for saline and alkaline soils, *Carex praegracilis* occurs on coastal sand dunes, dune slack, dune lakes, springs, streambanks, lakeshores, meadows, prairies, open woodlands, and roadsides.

In contrast, *Carex pansa* represents a geographically and ecologically restricted segregate of *Carex praegracilis* found on coastal sand dunes and around dune lakes only along the Pacific Coast from southern British Columbia to the Mendocino Coast, with

small, disjunct stands from the Monterey Coast south to near Ventura, and Santa Rosa Island.

At the southern extent of *Carex pansa* along Central California dune systems, the far more abundant *Carex praegracilis* can present a similar appearance and many misidentifications of *Carex pansa* have been made apparently based on geography and presence on the dunes. Robert Hoover in *The Vascular Plants of San Luis Obispo County, California* expresses this ambiguity with his statement, “The fact that plants showing the key-characters of *C. praegracilis* are also found on the dunes indicates that a genetic difference exists. On the other hand, plants identified by *Carex* specialists as *C. praegracilis* show so much variation among themselves that the validity of *C. pansa* as a species must be judged as doubtful.”

### **Mix-Ups and Misnomers**

Most of the horticultural material available as Dune Sedge, Sand-Dune Sedge, California Meadow Sedge, or Western Meadow Sedge was collected from California coastal dunes and fits well within the limits of *Carex praegracilis*. However, it is possible that true *Carex pansa* may be available from some Pacific Northwestern growers.

For over 100 years, *Carex praegracilis* has been known to botanists as Clustered Field Sedge, Field Sedge, or Blackcreeper Sedge (mostly in Eastern North America), while *Carex pansa* has been known as Sand-Dune Sedge or Dune Sedge. Beginning around 1992, the names California Meadow Sedge and Western Meadow Sedge appeared in horticultural references as English names for *Carex pansa* without any explanation or historical precedent. To avoid confusion with two eastern North

American sedges (*Carex praticola* Rydb., *Carex granularis* Muhl ex Willd) historically called Meadow Sedge, the names California Meadow Sedge and Western Meadow Sedge should be abandoned.

Instead, all *Carex praegracilis* whether wild or cultivated should be called Clustered Field Sedge, the name that has the longest historical usage, and is still the preferred English name in the most recent West Coast floras and checklists. If true *Carex pansa* is found within existing nursery stock, then the name Sand-Dune Sedge should be applied correctly.

## Diagnostic Features

Both *Carex pansa* and *Carex praegracilis* produce light to medium green tufts from elongated dark brown to blackish rhizomes. Tufts of *Carex pansa* typically rise less than 8 inches above the sand surface, with flowering culms to about 12 inches tall. *Carex praegracilis* exhibits much more variation in habit with coastal dune plants being of similar size to *Carex pansa*. Inland, *Carex praegracilis* tufts are typically taller and broader, often forming tussocks to 24 inches tall and wide in montane meadows. Inflorescences of the two are very similar, differing only in the technical details listed in **Table 1** and shown in **Figure 1**. To the naked eye, *Carex pansa* is separated by the broader, ovoid head of very dark purple-brown and glossy spikes. *Carex praegracilis* usually produces more elongated ellipsoid inflorescences of dull yellow-brown spikes.

## **Cultivars**

Nurseries continue to work with these sedges, and collections from a number of sites are now sold on the West Coast. The selection *Carex praeegracilis* ‘Laguna’ from the Laguna Mountains of San Diego County is offered by some Southern California growers. Other selections and named cultivars will surely develop as horticulturists observe plants in garden conditions, and as additional collections from wild populations enter the trade. More selections from dry-summer sites are needed.

## **Culture**

Water needs are typically less than for traditional turf grasses. Under humid-summer conditions (Sunset Zones 1–5,15–17,22–24) leaves remain green with little or no supplemental water, but under dry-summer conditions (Sunset Zones 6–14,18–21) plants require some supplemental irrigation to maintain a fresh appearance and to prevent drought dormancy. Fertilization is unnecessary in most soils, although a modest application of nitrogen will ensure richer green foliage. Mowing is a matter of taste and application. A tidy two-inch height might require a monthly trimming with a traditional lawn mower, while an informal meadow needs only an annual cutting with a string line trimmer. Rust is an occasional problem in coastal plantings under frequent overhead irrigation, but easily corrected by reducing irrigation frequency.

TABLE CAPTION (See separate file for Table 1)

**Table 1. Diagnostic Features of Sand-Dune Sedge and Clustered Field Sedge.**

FIGURE CAPTION (See separate file for Figure 1)

**Figure 1. Diagnostic Features of Sand-Dune Sedge and Clustered Field Sedge.**

Adapted from H.L. Mason (1969) *A Flora of the Marshes of California* and K.K. Mackenzie (1940) *North American Cariceae*.

AUTHOR INFO

**Michael Curto** is a senior research associate of the Earth and Soil Sciences Dept at Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo. Over the past three decades, his interests and experience have focused on the systematics, geography, and ecology of western North American grasses.

Michael Curto  
[mcurto@calpoly.edu](mailto:mcurto@calpoly.edu)  
Earth and Soil Sciences  
Cal Poly State University  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407  
805-474-1309