

Sedges, Grasses, and Rushes



River Keepers

Grasses are recognized by their flat leaves and stems.

Sedges, grasses, and rushes grow worldwide. There are hundreds of different species of each. All three types of plants are very similar to each other in appearance, and are therefore difficult to differentiate. Generally, they are all long with thin stems and leaves. Oftentimes they grow in the same area. These similarities cause many people to simply call all three plants “grasses,” without realizing that sedges and rushes are different.

Grasses, sedges, and rushes are wind-pollinated and consequently have no use for flashy petals to attract insect pollinators. As a result, all three plants produce very inconspicuous flowers that are usually yellow, green, or tan in color.

A simple rhyme to remember the aesthetic differences is:

Sedges have edges,
Rushes are round,
Grasses are hollow.
What have you found?

Sedges

Sedges exhibit triangular stems. If you hold one in your hand and slowly turn it, you will notice three prominent edges and a triangular shape. The leaves of sedges are flat and have a ridge running down the middle. They have leaves on three sides of the stem. Sedges are mostly perennial and evergreen, and prefer to grow in moist conditions. Their ovaries produce a single seed. Some sedges produce inch long prickly clusters of beak like fruit.

Grasses

Grasses are identified by their flat stems and flat leaves. They have leaves on two sides of the stem. Their stems are hollow. Near the crown or base of grasses, the flat leaves start to curl around each other. Therefore, the stems may appear slightly rounded. Another distinctive feature of grasses is the swollen nodes that they develop on their stems. The ovary of a grass produces a single-seeded grain. Fruits of grasses are variable, from plump kernels on an ear of sweet corn to the tiny, expensive seeds many people scatter.

Rushes

Rushes have stems that are clearly cylindrical or round. When cut from the plant, the stems are hollow and look like miniature soda straws. These hollow stems bring air to the base of the plant, since its roots are often submerged in mud and unable to get sufficient oxygen. The leaves of rushes are flat and are on two sides of the stem, like grasses. Most rushes are found in wet, boggy conditions. The ovary of a rush develops a many-seeded capsule. Many rushes make tiny globular fruiting structures.



Big Stock Photo

A flowering sedge.



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Rushes grow plentifully in wet areas.