

Washington Conservation District Plant of the Week – Fall 2010

By Jyneen Thatcher

September 16, 2010 – Bulrush and Winterberry

Some of the best plants for lakeshore edges are the bulrushes. There are lots of different species to choose from, with a variety of heights and physical characteristics. The common name of "bulrush" is usually associated with the genus *Scirpus*, including the recent reclassification of some of the species to the genus *Schoenoplectus*, different than the rushes in the genus *Juncus*. There are a lot of great features with the bulrushes and few negatives, which is why we use them so often in shoreline restorations and dissuade landowners from removing them along natural shorelines. The roots stabilize the shore against erosion, the stems absorb wave action and further protect the shore from erosion, the stems provide resting place for emerging insects such as dragonflies, the seeds provide food for waterfowl and birds, the stems are used by mammals and birds for nesting and food, and the seeds are eaten by waterfowl and songbirds.



Soft-stem bulrush (*Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani*, previously known as *Scirpus validus*) has a single, round stem, tapering towards the tip. The flower head emerges from the stem towards the tip, and can vary from a very short stalk for each spikelet to more than an inch long, drooping under the weight of the spikelet. One of the distinguishing characteristics of bulrushes

is that the flower/seed cluster appears to come out of the stem. The portion that extends beyond the flower is technically a leaf, but it sure looks like the stem extends beyond the flower cluster. There is a similar species called hard-stem bulrush (*S. acutus*) with the major difference in identifying characteristics is that the stem is hard rather than soft. That's a rather subjective difference, even for me, but I'm lucky - soft-stem is much more common around Washington County.



Woolgrass (*Scirpus cyperinus*) is easily recognizable year round, as the flowerheads are persistent, surviving well into the next growing season, and look "wooly." Unlike the soft-stem bulrush, the flowerhead of woolgrass start at the end of the stem, although there are 1-2 leaf-like bracts just below the flowerhead. The stem is round, like the classic bulrush, but starts in a sedge-like cluster of basal leaves. If the flower stalk is absent (like in early summer) it's very easy to mis-identify the plant as a *Carex* species. One of the advantages of using woolgrass in wetland vegetation restorations, is its ability to persist against invasions by reed canarygrass. Planting a barrier row of well-developed young plants between the restoration area and an existing field of reed canarygrass can provide enough



protection to allow the new plantings to mature. The flower stalk is frequently around one meter tall, with the basal leaf cluster about 1 foot in height, making it a good feature plant in a wetland garden.



To round out this week's feature, I've started to notice winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*). This shrub is found along wetland edges, and often along road-side ditches at the edge of woodlands. The leaves are rather plain until you get real close. Then you can notice the veins, which are prominent on the underside, causing the leaf surface to look a bit puckered. It's the berries

that get your attention - bright orange-red, wrapped tightly around the stem. The plant is sometimes referred to as northern holly, and it's tempting to harvest the branches for winter decorations. Unfortunately for that idea, the berries turn brown and fall off by early winter. The good news is that helps disperse the seeds, and provides winter food for birds.



September 9, 2010 - Turtlehead Plus

I've been reminded recently that although I'm not spending as much time in wetlands as I previously had, I shouldn't ignore them completely for the Plant of the Week. So this week, I'm featuring a few of my wetland favorites for use in gardens or large-scale restorations, which bloom late in the summer.



There are two species of native turtleheads in Minnesota. The most common is the white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*). Most of the field guides describe its habitat as wet woods, but I've only seen it in sunny areas. Amazingly, I've found it surviving in semi-drained peatlands, surrounded by reed canarygrass. But the more sunlight it gets, the more abundant the flowers. It's usually less than 3 feet tall (often less than 2 feet tall), with an erect habit, making it a good choice for a garden plot.

The leaves are opposite, slightly sessile or very short petioles, about 1 inch wide and 2-5 inches long. Rather non-descript if the flowers aren't present. Maybe that's why I've failed to notice it in the woods.

The other species commonly seen in Minnesota is the pink turtlehead (*Chelone lyoni*), which is frequently planted in gardens. The leaves and plant habit are very similar, with the color of the flower and the length of the petiole being the most obvious differences. This species is native to southern Appalachia, but has spread throughout the eastern states by escaping from cultivation. It is about the same height as the white turtlehead, not nearly as tall as the Joe-pye weed seen in the comparison photo (For reference, Karen is about 5'3".)



The other native species in Minnesota (*Chelone obliqua*) has a pink flower and narrow leaves, but I've never seen it, or gotten a photo of it.



If you find the white turtlehead in a wetland, keep your eyes open for royal fern. It's amazing how often I've found them growing together, regardless of the graminoids present: sometimes sedges, sometimes reed canarygrass. Royal fern (*Osmunda regalis*) is a true fern, although it has a bipinnate leaf frond, looking more like a compound leaf than most other common ferns. The leaves sprout from an exposed crown, but the plant is more upright than the fountain-shape of other ferns. It has a separate (fertile) frond of spores. It is found in wetter sites than other members of the same genus (cinnamon and interrupted ferns), and does best with more sunlight than shade. It does well in a garden setting, as long as the soil doesn't dry out. Then it tends to crisp up and drop its leaves.

If you go walking in the woods, you might see clusters of red, fleshy berries. One of the possibilities is jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*). Other possibilities include red baneberry or false solomon seal. To confirm as jack, look for remnants of the leaf stalk, as shown in this photo. The seeds will readily germinate, which is why we often find clusters of plants, presumably from a single cluster of seeds, but need scarification, such as multiple freeze-thaw cycles or the digestive track of a chipmunk. If you want to clean the seeds yourself, to start your own patch, be sure to wear gloves to protect your skin from the acids in the seed coat.

