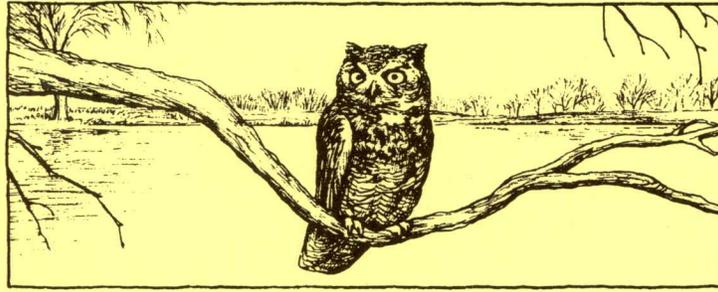


# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



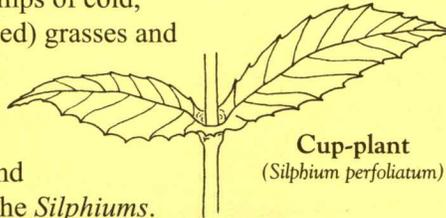
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## SILPHIUMS OF SUMMER

-- Mark Spreyer

In recent years, I've been asked to introduce classes to prairies in late winter. Trying to sell this habitat while standing in clumps of cold, wet, brown (if the snow has melted) grasses and decaying vegetation can be something of a challenge.

One genus, though, is there to lend this desperate naturalist a hand, the *Silphiums*. This group includes prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*), compass plant (*S. laciniatum*) and cup-plant (*S. perfoliatum*). Let's take a closer look at these year-round stand-outs.

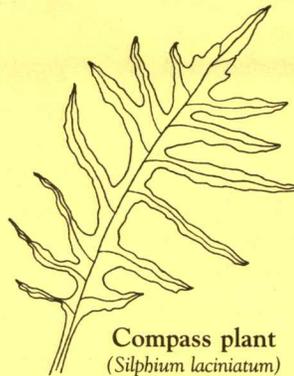


Cup-plant  
(*Silphium perfoliatum*)

John Curtis describes a virgin prairie in Wisconsin that, in 1940, was purchased and used as a pasture by the new owner. He writes that the horses and cattle sought out prairie docks and compass plants "like hidden candy at a child's birthday party."

### Silphium Similarities

The candy simile is an appropriate one. Several members of this genus produce a chewable sap or rosin that was favored by both Native Americans and early settlers. Is it any wonder how rosinweed (*Silphium integrifolium*) got its common name?



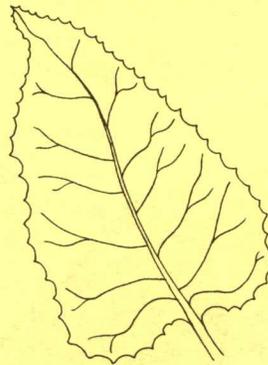
Compass plant  
(*Silphium laciniatum*)

### All Hands on Dock

Prairie dock grows in clumps that, in the winter landscape, can be spotted several hundred feet away. Why so visible? Because their leaves are huge, measuring sixteen inches high and twelve inches across.

The prominent leaves also offer students an interesting tactile experience. They are sandpaper rough, particularly on the back surface. This coating of prickly hairs traps a thin layer of still air immediately adjacent to the leaf's surface. When you grow out on the hot, open prairie, moisture conservation is job one. The unshaven leaf's calm layer of air reduces the drying effect of harsh winds.

This scratchy surface does not, however, make it less tasty. Whether it is the bison of the past or the cattle of today, young prairie dock leaves are on the menu for large herbivores. If an area is overgrazed, the docks will quickly decrease.



Prairie dock  
(*Silphium terebinthinaceum*)

While we're at it, all the *Silphiums* have very similar flowers, bright yellow in color and two to four inches across. All of the ones mentioned here bloom between July and September.

As with the closely related sunflowers, what appears to be a large single flower is actually a "composite" of many tiny flowers. What looks like petals are ray flowers while the center is composed of a dense cluster of disk flowers.

Interestingly, with sunflowers it is the disk flowers that become seeds. With *Silphiums*, it is the ray flowers that produce seeds.

Like sunflowers, *Silphiums* are tall. For example, prairie dock flowers can reach a height of nine feet and compass plant flowers can top ten feet.

## STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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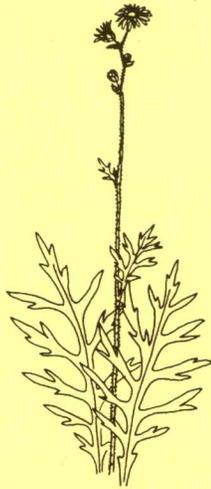
## Pointing the Way

Much as *Silphium* flowers are similar, the leaves are not. While dock leaves are as broad as a shovel blade, the compass plant leaves are dissected like a two-sided rake.

The coarsely-textured leaves, which are clumped at the plant's base, are one to three feet tall and up to two feet wide.

As some of you may know, the leaf arrangement is what earned this *Silphium* its common name. Compass plant leaves generally align themselves in a north-south direction, a trait pioneers found quite useful. By minimizing the surface area facing south, the plant keeps water loss to a minimum.

In decades past, compass plants were accurate indicators of original prairie soils. Today, things are a bit different. Since it can be easily propagated from seed, compass plants are now often found growing where a human chose to plant them.



drink while looking for seeds in the former flowerheads. Tree frogs can also be found in this plant's small, elevated pools.

If you'd like to attract some of these interesting critters to your yard, cup-plants might be for you. They'll do well in sun or partial shade but will need some room. Cup-plants self-sow readily and can grow to a height of eight feet.

To learn more about *Silphiums* and other prairie plants join **Daria Sapp** on her prairie rambles in July and August (see Programs below).

## One More Thing

Don't confuse prairie dock with the non-native common burdock. While both have large leaves, burdock has pink blossoms that turn into those sticky burs which most dog owners are, unfortunately, quite familiar with.

Of course, you might find a burdock growing near a prairie dock. If so, you know what you'll have? A pair-a-docks.

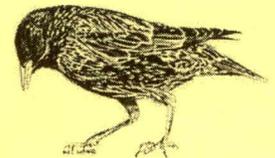
## PROGRAMS

Program Basics: TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs (except for bird banding open houses), PLEASE CALL US AT (847) 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@wildblue.net. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

## BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.

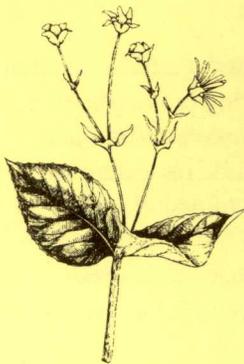


Dates: Sundays, June 1, July 6, Aug. 3 & Sept. 7  
Time: 9:00AM to Noon  
Fee: None

## Off With Their Heads!

If you are a human who is growing some *Silphiums*, keep an eye out for the head-clipping weevil.

According to University of Illinois researchers, this weevil causes significant damage to *Silphiums* by clipping flowering stems and severing resin canals. Not surprisingly, the weevils inflict more damage where the diversity of *Silphium* species is low. It's enough to drive you to drink which brings us to...



## Cup-plant

As with compass plant, the leaves are this *Silphium*'s most distinctive feature. Unlike dock or compass plant, cup-plant's leaves are arranged in pairs clasp-like the plant's stout, square stem.

The basically triangular leaves are six to twelve inches long and four to eight inches wide. Where they join together, they curve downward and form a deep cup. This formation not only gave this plant its common name but also its species moniker, *perfoliatum* or perforated leaf.

The leaves do, indeed, collect water which is enjoyed by many small animals. I once saw a goldfinch stop for a

## SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does. If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled. Also, if nobody makes reservations, the program will not take place. *So, please call (847) 428-OWLS to let us know if you plan to attend.*

Date: Sundays, June 8 & August 17  
Time: 8:00AM  
Fee: None  
Age: 10 years and up

## BUGS & BUTTERFLIES

Join Stillman's naturalist and search the nature center's woods and fields for butterflies, beetles, grasshoppers and other bugs. If you've got a bug net at home, bring it along! Since we will be handling the bugs, please minimize the amount of insect repellent that you have on your hands. *Don't forget to call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations.*

Date: Sunday, July 20  
Time: 2:00 PM  
Fee: None



## PRAIRIE RAMBLES

Our volunteers, under the leadership of Daria Sapp, have been working hard to get prairie plants growing in Stillman's "south forty." They've been quite successful and this is your chance to join Daria on a tour of this colorful site. *Please call (847) 428-OWLS to let us know if you plan to attend.*

Date: Sundays, July 27 & Aug. 24  
Time: 10:00AM  
Fee: None

## POND LIFE: From the Bottom Up

This afternoon, with the help of long-handled dip nets, visitors will scoop into our pond in hopes of catching crayfish, dragonfly larvae, tadpoles and other rarely seen pond inhabitants. Dress in clothes and shoes you don't mind getting muddy.

Date: Sunday, August 10  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None

*All kids are gifted; some just open their packages earlier than others.*

-Michael Carr

## George Sawicki 1927 - 2008

Some of Stillman's board members stick around for a few years and others, for decades. George Sawicki was one of the latter.

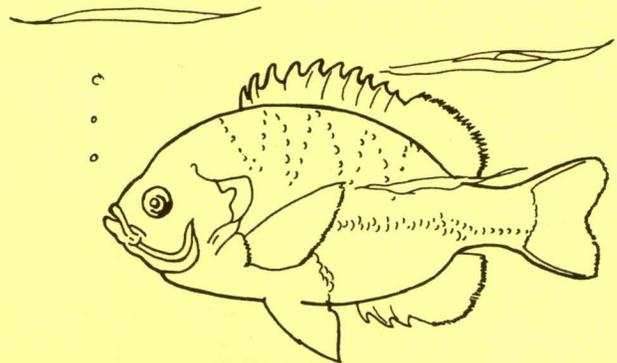
He was an outdoorsman who loved fishing and walking his spaniels. George often hiked Stillman's trails with a dog and I'm not sure what he appreciated more, enjoying nature through his own eyes or watching his beloved pets enjoy nature through canine eyes, ears, and noses.

George brought both practical and imaginative suggestions to board meetings. In fact, reminders of George can be found all around Stillman.

George dealt with Cook County to get the brown and white directional signs on Penny Road installed. He also tracked down some quality Michigan pine for the large wooden sign at our public entrance.

Our first bench, and still the one with the best view, was George's handiwork. It sits at the south end of the lake looking north. Wooden benches don't last forever and when the first one was done, George took care of finding a replacement.

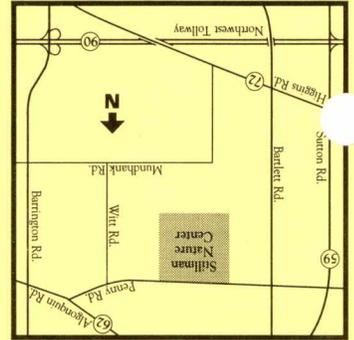
Unlike his favorite bench, George Sawicki cannot be replaced but he is remembered. Truth be told, George's dog didn't always come when he first whistled and so, he whistled again. Every now and then, as I approach his lakeside bench, I still hear that whistle.



## CALLING VOLUNTEERS

Stillman has the tools. We need healthy, outdoor-loving bodies to wield them. Thursday mornings are our usual work times. We start at 9:00 AM and wrap up around noon. Questions? Call (847) 428-OWLS(6957) or email us at [stillnc@wildblue.net](mailto:stillnc@wildblue.net).

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OPEN SUNDAYS 9AM - 4PM

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*If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.*

- Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.  
 I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from \_\_\_\_\_ to the name and address listed below.

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