

Conservation Corner

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As July draws to a close, our Iowa Butterfly Survey Walks are also drawing to a close. I've been counting butterflies at the Varina Wetlands Complex since 2015, and last week was the first time I've seen the potholes completely dried up, testament to the scarcity of rain during June and July. And while the crops struggle and the muskrats depart for Cedar Creek, the deep roots of the prairie grasses and herbs help them survive the periodic droughts that are one of the characteristics of a temperate grassland biome. And so each week I trudge along, wilting in the heat and humidity, while all around me the prairie wildflowers and grasses crash in waves of yellow, white, and purple upon the gentle hillsides. One of the plants currently rising above the swells is the cup plant, which will be this week's plant friend.

The cup plant, *Silphium perfoliatum*, is a member of the daisy family, albeit a tall and robust one that can withstand extreme weather conditions. Often growing in dense colonies, cup plants are native to the moist woodlands, prairies, and low ground of eastern and central North America. Perhaps you've heard it called the carpenter weed (for its square stem) or the Indian cup or ragged cup (for the shallow cups that are formed by the paired leaves). In fact, the plant's species name comes from the Latin for "through the leaf." It is also known as the rosin weed (for the resinous juices of some species). Chewing gum, anyone?

The cup plant is a perennial herb that may grow up to 8 or 10 feet high. And while it is known and named for its shallow cups that catch rain water, its showy yellow flowerheads are also special. Growing up to 3 inches in diameter, each flower features a central disc and 20 to 30 petal-like ray flowers. When pollinated by a bee or butterfly, each ray may produce a small winged seed.

Indians used the cup plant for emergency drinking water, especially when traveling through unfamiliar territory. Iowa's state bird, the Eastern Goldfinch, also drinks from its cups and dines on its seeds. Many native tribes used the cup plant's leaves and roots for treating rheumatism, fever, and other ailments. In fact, the cup plant was so highly regarded among Indian medicine men that Wisconsin tribes journeyed to Iowa to gather roots to transplant in their medicine gardens.

In closing, just a reminder that this week is the last chance to join our 2017 Jr. Naturalist Day Camp. Registration deadline is July 27! All area and visiting students entering Grades K – 6 are welcome. We will meet at the PCCB Nature Center on August 1 & 2 from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. for activities, crafts, games, and snacks. This year's field trip will be an outing on August 3 to the Henry Dorley Zoo in Omaha. I wonder what sights and sounds at the zoo will rise above the swell.

