

# Rare roadside plants need your help

*A no-mow area is often all it takes to keep these special plants safe, although an ecologist needs to make a plan for each site.*

## Why help preserve Wisconsin threatened and endangered plants?

- Promote biodiversity—a natural mix of many different species which provides for a healthy environment
- Protect historic plants and habitats for future generations
- Preserve plants important to butterflies and other insects
- Preserve plants which may be future sources for medicines, treatments, etc.
- Help maintain a varied and attractive landscape

## What you can do:

- **Contact** your local DNR Transportation Liaison or Regional Ecologist to find out more
- **Mark** right-of-ways once a species is identified – Local citizens and groups may be available to help
- **Protect** by timed mowing or a no-mow area
- **Alert** crews that do brushing, digging, spraying, or utility work
- **Comply** with administrative rule (NR27) and state statute

**LAST JULY** Randy Roloff, Patrol Superintendent with the Outagamie County Highway Department, got some unexpected news. There were some rare, endangered plants growing on a roadside that his crews mow each summer.

An amateur botanist spotted pink flowers peeking through tall grass and recognized a rare prairie plant, the Hairy Wild Petunia (*Ruellia humilis*). Pat Robinson, the DNR ecologist for the region, was skeptical when contacted. The nearest known population of Wild Petunias is 100 miles further south. But there it was!

"I was surprised," says Roloff. "The guy that mows out there has been mowing for over 20 years. He probably saw it, but didn't know it was something special."

The Wild Petunia is included on the state's *Threatened and Endangered Species List*, and is protected on public lands under state statute (*Section 29.604, Wis. Stats.*) Fortunately, it is easy for Outagamie County to protect the plant there. Just don't mow it. Robinson outlined an area and Roloff put up some signs and will alert mowing crews before they go out this summer.

"It was a pretty painless process," says Roloff. "It's not a big deal to protect an area. Come summer I'll show it to the crews and tell them: if you see any other sights like this, let me know."

A no-mow area is often all it takes to keep these special plants safe, although an ecologist needs to make a plan for each site. "We are hopeful that this [Outagamie County site] can serve as an example of a simple, cost-effective model that other municipalities can replicate to protect rare plants that occur in their right-of-ways," said Robinson in a letter to Roloff.

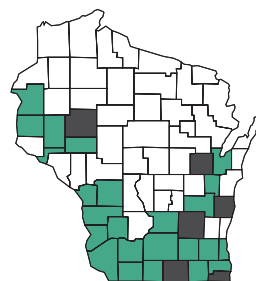
With more acres of public land in roadsides than in all the parks in the state, the chances are good for finding protected species there. In fact, a roadside sometimes provides a plant's preferred conditions.

The rare Dwarf Lake Iris (*Iris lacustris*) is an example. This state and federally endangered plant can only grow in special soils found on the northern shores of Lakes Michigan and Huron. It also does better with little competition from other plants.

"There are 44 current records of this iris in Wisconsin, all in Door and Brown counties; about 16 of these are at least partially in roadside ditches," says Craig Anderson, a DNR state botanist. Occasional roadside mowing may actually help the Dwarf Lake Iris. On the other hand, a ditch dredging

## Rare plants along Wisconsin roadsides

### Cream Gentian or Yellowish Gentian (*Gentiana alba*)



- **FOUND** in Brown, Calumet, Columbia, Crawford, Dane, Dunn, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Grant, Green, Iowa, Jefferson, La Crosse, Lafayette, Milwaukee, Monroe, Pepin, Polk, Racine, Richland, St Croix, Sauk, Vernon, Walworth, and Waukesha
- **HISTORICAL** in Chippewa, Dodge, Kenosha, Outagamie, Rock, and Sheboygan counties

**BLOOMS**  
August–September

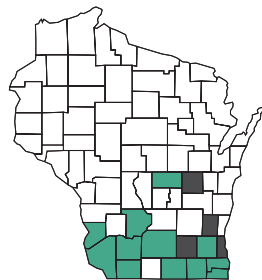
**FLOWER**  
Cream-colored, 1¼", tube shape with small opening at top, Clusters of many flowers

**PLANT**  
Upright – 1 to 3 feet tall with sturdy stems, usually not branched

**GROWS IN**  
Varied soil and moisture conditions  
Sometimes found in roadside ditches and railroad right-of-ways



### Purple Milkweed (*Asclepias purpurascens*)



- **FOUND** in Crawford, Dane, Grant, Iowa, Kenosha, Lafayette, Racine, Rock, Sauk, Walworth, Waukesha, and Waushara counties
- **HISTORICAL** in Jefferson, Milwaukee, Washington, Winnebago

**BLOOMS**  
June–August

**FLOWER**  
Purple-red flower cluster—only 1-3 per plant; always at or near top of stem; often produces pods

**PLANT**  
1½ to 6 feet tall; looks like common milkweed

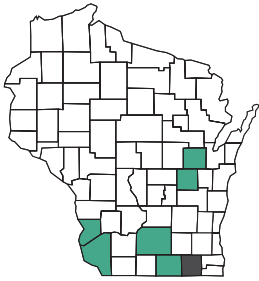
**GROWS IN**  
Ditches and more likely in dry soil



project could easily wipe out a big percentage of this tiny plant's last stands.

About 25 protected plants in various parts of the state are known to grow on roadsides or prefer conditions often found there. Some locations are recorded, but there could be others. Local citizens and naturalist groups can help look for them, or may already know of populations. Your staff and mowing crews could spot others.

## Hairy Wild Petunia (*Ruellia humilis*)



### BLOOMS

May to October

### FLOWER

Looks like garden petunia 1 1/4" pink to purple, funnel shaped

### PLANT

Upright, short: 3"-18"  
Often less than 12"

### GROWS

Sandy, loamy soil in prairies, woods and roadsides

■ **FOUND** in Crawford, Dane, Grant, Outagamie, Rock, and Winnebago counties

■ **HISTORICAL** in Walworth



Hairy Wild Petunia discovered along an Outagamie County roadside in 2005.

NO MOWING  
NATIVE  
PLANTS

Signs indicate a protected area using general term: "Native Plants" without publicizing exact location.

About 25 protected plants in various parts of the state are known to grow on roadsides or prefer conditions often found there.

## Dwarf Lake Iris (*Iris lacustris*)



### BLOOMS

Peak late May, a few into July

### FLOWER

Blue-purple flower (a few white), 3" diameter and 3" off the ground

### PLANT

Leaves 6" long in fans like garden iris

### GROWS IN

Partial or filtered sun; shallow soils (alkaline); near white cedars

■ **FOUND ONLY** on north shore of Lake Michigan in Door and Brown. Very rare.

■ **HISTORICAL** in Milwaukee County

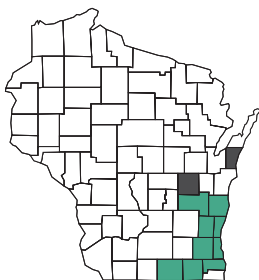


CLAYTON ALWAY (CLOSEUP) © USDA-NRCS



ROBERT H. MOHLER/BRUCK © USDA-NRCS

## Forked Aster (*Aster furcatus*)



### BLOOMS

August through October

### FLOWER

Tiny, white, star-shaped, 1/2" across, branched cluster of 9-18 flowers

### PLANT

12"-32" tall

### GROWS IN

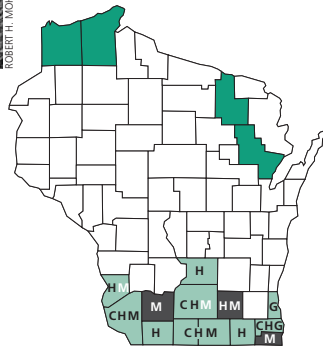
Moist woods and edges, often near streams

■ **FOUND** in only part of Midwest. Rare. In Wisconsin: Fond du Lac, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Rock, Sheboygan, Walworth, Washington, and Waukesha counties

■ **HISTORICAL** in Kewaunee and Winnebago



KITTY KOHOUT, UW-STEVENS POINT



### EXISTING LOCATIONS

- Arrow-leaf Sweet Coltsfoot
- G Axillary Goldenrod
- H Giant Yellow Hyssop
- C Pale Purple Coneflower
- M Pink Milkwort

### HISTORICAL LOCATIONS

- H M M Hyssop, Milkwort

## Axillary Goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*)



THOMAS G. BARNES © USDA-NRCS

### BLOOMS

August to October

### FLOWER

Cream to yellow; 3-4 short clusters where leaf joins stem

## Arrow-leaf Sweet Coltsfoot (*Petasites sagittatus*)



JUNE M. DOBERPUL, UW-STEVENS POINT

### BLOOMS

May to June

### FLOWER

Small: 1/2"; white

## Pale Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*)



PAUL BRIGBOT FRECK © USDA-NRCS

### BLOOMS

June to August

### FLOWER

Drooping, purple; one to a stem

## Giant Yellow Hyssop (*Agastache nepetoides*)



DANIEL REED, WWW.ZENTHEWILD.COM

### BLOOMS

July through October

### FLOWER

Green-yellow, 5-parted cylindrical spikes

## Pink Milkwort (*Polygala incarnata*)



JAMES R. SINE, WISCONSIN STATE HERBARIUM

### BLOOMS

July through October

### FLOWER

Pink, small spiky cluster 1/2"-1 1/2" on single, distinct bluish-green colored stems

## Other endangered or threatened roadside plants

The maps, images and descriptions here show some protected plants that may pop up on your roadsides. Maybe one of your sharp-eyed guys could become a hero for locating and reporting a rare species.

Color pictures and more details are available on the TIC Web site: <http://tic.engr.wisc.edu> (pdf 2.3 MB) (ppt 4.4 MB).