

# Variable sedge (*Carex polymorpha*)

Sedge Family (Cyperaceae)

**Pennsylvania Endangered**

**State status S2 (imperiled) Global status G3 (vulnerable)**

**Description** - Variable sedge is an herbaceous perennial with grass-like leaves. The flowering stalk is usually stiffly erect, 12–20 inches tall, and contains a cluster of male flowers at the top and 1–3 spikes of female flowers below. Flowering stems first appear in May and remain intact through the summer with the fruits persisting in place.



fruiting stems

Variable sedge is most similar to *Carex vestita*, with which it often grows. However, *C. vestita* has minutely hairy perigynia (the sac-like structure that encloses each female flower) compared with the smooth perigynia of variable sedge, and a taller, more upright leafy shoot. A rhizomatous growth habit allows variable sedge to form extensive clonal colonies of leafy vegetative shoots. Flowering or fruiting stems are often few and are found mainly in openings, light patches, or along woods road margins. The shoots are annual, but each year the rhizomes elongate and branch, and new shoots are produced at the tips.

**Range** - Variable sedge is a globally rare species found only in the northeastern United States. Its range extends from Maine to West Virginia and is centered in the Pocono region of Pennsylvania.



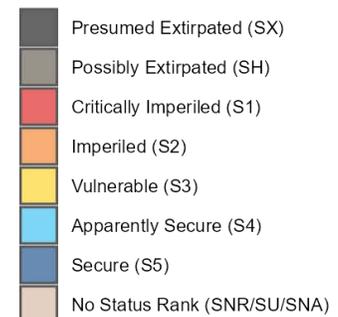
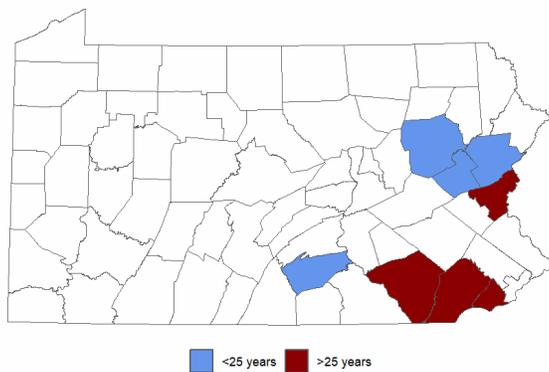
rhizomes

**Management Issues** - According to a study of variable sedge habitat at Nescopeck State Park by Jamie Horvath, Morris Arboretum intern 2001–2002, the sedge occurs in sites where the forest is dominated by white oak or red maple and the canopy is 70–90 percent closed. Because most populations are located close to streams, soil moisture is assumed to be an important factor.

Variable Sedge (*Carex polymorpha*)

## North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe 2025



### Reference:

- NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer [web application] NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at <https://explorer.natureserve.org> (Accessed: May 8, 2025)

Fact sheet prepared by Ann F. Rhoads and Timothy A. Block,  
Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania,  
100 Northwestern Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19118

