

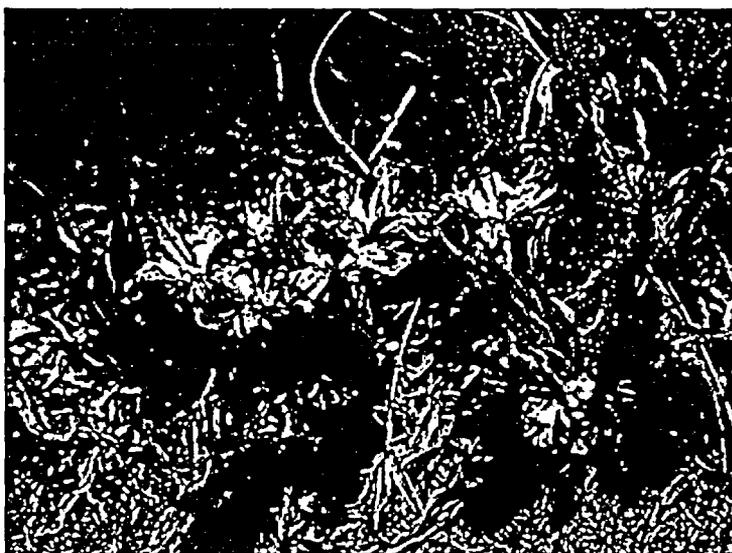
Dwarf Lake Iris

(Iris lacustris)

Hugging the ground in sun-dappled openings in mixed northern forests, the dwarf lake iris grows only in very special sites near the shores of the northern Great Lakes. This diminutive wildflower is appreciated for its great beauty, extreme rarity and for its genetic potential. Rare to begin with because of its restricted habitat, dwarf lake iris is becoming rarer still because of shoreland development.

What does the dwarf lake iris look like?

Though small in stature, this iris catches the eye of every passerby when it is in full bloom. Like a miniature blue flag iris, the deep blue to purple blossoms appear first in early May, and most flowers have faded by early June. The purple blossoms are enhanced by bright yellow crests that decorate the three main petals. Three-inch diameter flowers are held a mere three inches off the surface of the ground; the leaves, arranged in fans, grow up to six inches long. The observant naturalist will see that the leaves and flowers emerge from delicate brown rhizomes (horizontal stems) that creep along the soil surface. Even when not in flower, the iris can be recognized by its leaves and by the way it grows in dense colonies.



What growing conditions does the iris require?

The dwarf lake iris occurs only near the northern shores of the Great Lakes. In a few sites, in openings in white cedar and birch forests allow just the right amount of sun to penetrate to the forest floor, the iris grows. It thrives in the cool air that flows off the lakes, and the thin, moist, sandy or rocky soil near the shores. Curiously enough, it also seems to grow well along the edges of some country roads in the same areas. One of the reasons that the dwarf lake iris is so rare is that it must have just the right combination of light, humidity, soil, moisture and temperature to live.

What is the history of the dwarf lake iris?

After the great glaciers retreated from the middle parts of North America, the dwarf lake iris appeared on lakeshores. Its nearest relative is the crested iris of the southern Appalachians. Perhaps a variety of the crested iris followed the retreating glacier northward, adapting to the slightly different conditions that it encountered and evolving into the species we know today.

How does the iris reproduce?

A perennial, this native wildflower lives for many years. It seems to reproduce mostly vegetatively, established plants sending out new rhizomes - thus increasing the size of a colony. It rarely reproduces from seed. Those who observe these irises year after year seldom see a seed pod.

Where does the iris grow in Wisconsin and in North America?

Near the rocky and sandy northern shores of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron are the only places on the globe where this rare iris grows. It may be found in Ontario in Canada and in the United States only in Michigan and Wisconsin. Within the state of Wisconsin it occurs only in two counties: Door and Brown.

How rare is the plant?

The plant is very rare, indeed. This rarity is due both to a limited amount of habitat and to increasing human disturbance of shoreline areas. It is here that cottages and year-round homes are being built; it is here where condominiums are being erected and the roads and parking lots to serve them are covering the earth. In recognition of the rarity of the plant and its habitat, the dwarf lake iris is listed both by the State of Wisconsin and by the United States government as "threatened". This means that it is a "species ... which is likely in the foreseeable future to become endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range."

What can I do to protect this valuable species?

The key to protecting this rare iris is to protect its habitat from destruction by construction and development. Beyond that, it is important to restrict the use of herbicides and pesticides, road salt and excessive trampling in the neighborhood of the plant. Picking the flowers prevents the chance of seeds being formed and sometimes results in the plant's being uprooted. Construction sites should be kept away from iris colonies. To encourage it where it already grows requires some knowledge: preserving just the right balance of sun and shade is critical. Property owners on whose land the iris grows can help by keeping track of their iris populations and by reporting such information to the Bureau of Endangered Resources.

To report such data or to get more information, please contact:

Landowner Contact Specialist
Bureau of Endangered Resources
Department of Natural Resources
P. O. Box 7921
Madison, Wisconsin
53707 (608) 264-6039

Excerpt from The Endangered and Threatened Plants of Wisconsin

synonym:

Status: threatened in Wisconsin; threatened in U.S.

Habitat Description: beach ridges and stabilized dunes, limestone ledges, forest gaps and edges, and roadsides. Not found on deep, rich soils.

Habitat Classification

WI NHI: Lake Dune, Northern Dry-Mesic Forest, Boreal Forest

Curtis: Lake Dune, Northern Dry-Mesic Forest, Boreal Forest, and Ridge and Swale Complex

Kotar: NA

Forest Cover: Cedar

Range: Brown, Door, and Milwaukee

Comments: a blue-flowered iris which occasionally produces white flowers. Abundance increases with canopy closure.

Phenology: flowering peaks in late May but some plants may flower into July

Field Guides:

Britton and Brown, p.1:446/p.1:447

Gleason 1963, p.218

Gleason 1991, p.848

Voss I, p.431/Frontispiece

Wagnerman, p.10/p.10

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