PETAL PUSHER

November-December 2026 Newsletter of the Missouri Native Plant Society Volume 41 No.6
"… to promote the enjoyment, preservation, conservation, restoration, and study of the flora native to Missouri."

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Using a Dichotomous Key

by Justin Thomas

There are lots of tools one can use to identify plants, from field guides or asking an expert, to using phone-based image processors. There really is no "right way" to do it, as long as the correct identification is acquired, but there are better informed ways. I'm fond of the adage "it isn't the right answer unless you can say why". Being able to say "why" something is what it is means you have actual knowledge about the subject. Phone apps are great and they provide an entry point for people that are new to plant identification or that don't particularly need or want to know the "why". But phone apps are like using a calculator to do math. It outsources the "doing" and is not the best method for learning to identify plants yourself.

The primary way plants are identified in scientific literature and in floras written by plant taxonomists is through dichotomous keys. A dichotomous key is a series of paired either/or statements wherein one chooses the option that best suits the plant in hand and moves you to the next corresponding set of paired choices until a final determination is acquired. The pairs of choices are either numbered the same or have the same alignment on the left margin. Or both.

The benefits of using a dichotomous key are many, but they require you to work for those benefits – such is life and real learning. By using keys, one encounters plant terminology that helps you learn what characters are important to observe about plants and that allow you to communicate with other plant enthusiasts. Dichotomous keys are also a great way to learn about plants that you do not yet know. Each choice that is made while using a dichotomous key eliminates a set of species and moves you closer to the plant you are identifying. If you pay attention to which species are being eliminated and why, when you do encounter one of them you will already know about it. One of the most fun things about using a dichotomous key is recognizing a plant for the first time simply because you already learned it by accident while keying something else.

The following is an example of a dichotomous key. It is a key to the goldenrods of Missouri based on readily observable field characters that was published in Missouriensis, the journal of the Missouri Native Plant Society, in 2002. Find a goldenrod and give it a try!

The following key is a corrected version of a paper published in the 2002 issue of *Missouriensis* (the journal of the Missouri Native Plant Society). Errors in the original occurred after the editorial process.

Identifying goldenrods to species level, especially in sterile states, is notoriously difficult due to the diversity of the genus and subtle differences among species. This difficulty often serves as a barrier to the accurate and timely collection of field data by public and private conservation agencies throughout the state as well as impedes the interests of the curious observer. While Steyermark's (1963) treatment bases 25 of 29 couplets on vegetative qualities, the remaining four occur early in the key and thus subordinate vegetative characters to floral. The following key attempts to facilitate the identification of all goldenrods growing naturally in Missouri by allowing determinations based on vegetative characteristics observable throughout the growing season.
To use this key, one must be certain the specimen in question is indeed a goldenrod. While goldenrods are quite distinct in vegetative morphology, they can be and often are mistaken for asters in terms of size, leaf shape, and overall stature. While the subtle characters of each genus often transcend verbal description, one can quickly narrow the focus by the following characters;

- if basal and lower stem leaves are cordate or truncate, it is not a goldenrod
- if leaves are triple-nerved, it is not an aster
- if crushed leaves smell like carrots, it is probably a goldenrod; if not, it is probably an aster
- if the stem is branched below the inflorescence, it is probably an aster
- if the stem is unbranched, it is probably a goldenrod (unless the tip is damaged)
- goldenrod foliage tends to be somewhat yellow-green; aster foliage is almost always darker green to bluish-green

Once the specimen is determined to be a goldenrod, the following key will greatly facilitate identification to species. Varieties are not addressed in the present work.

1. Basal rosette present or lowest leaves of the stem larger than the middle and upper stem leaves (thus, leaves get smaller from base of the plant up); note: as the growing season progresses the lower leaves may be dead and shriveled, thus requiring close examination.
    2. Leaves conduplicate (folded along the midrib into two equal halves), long, linear and entire with scabrous margins; obligate to wetlands ..... *S. riddellii*
    2. Leaves with flat, non-linear blades that are usually toothed (less often so in *S. speciosa*); various habitats
        3. Upper surface of leaf extremely scabrous; stems angled; plants of swampy meadows, fens, swampy thickets and moist ledges of dripping limestone bluffs . . . . . *S. patula*
        3. Upper surface of leaf glabrous or with pubescence other than extremely scabrous; stems terete; plants of various habitats
            4. Leaves with a single prominent longitudinal nerve (single-nerved)
                5. Leaves glabrous to glabrate on upper and lower surfaces; if glabrate then hairs limited to the veins of the lower leaf surface
                    6. Leaves extremely reduced up the stem and becoming bract-like; basal leaves narrowly oblanceolate; primarily restricted to limestone and dolomite glades and rocky prairies of the Ozarks region . . . . . *S. gattingeri*
                    6. Leaves gradually reduced in size up the stem; basal leaves wider; plants of various habitats
                        7. Lower leaves entire to remotely toothed . . . . . *S. speciosa*
                        7. Lower leaves with conspicuous, regular teeth
                            8. Leaves dark green; lower stem and basal leaves typically wide and abruptly contracted to a definite petiole (although with decurrent tissue); upper leaf surface darker green than lower surface, which often appears grayish-green . . . . . *S. arguta*
                            8. Leaves light to olive-green; lower and basal leaves merely tapered to a petiole; leaf surfaces essentially the same color . . . . . *S. juncea*
                5. Leaves conspicuously pubescent on upper and/or lower surfaces
                    9. Pubescence on leaf surfaces hirtellous (short-dense) which gives them an unusual texture ranging from soft-scratchy to velvety
                    10. Basal leaves lacking decurrent tissue on the petiole; blade

oblanceo-elliptic; cauline leaves sessile to clasping; inflorescence corymbiform . . . . . *S. rigida*

10. Basal leaves possessing decurrent tissue on the petiole; blade spatulate to oblanceolate; cauline leaves tapering to the base; inflorescence paniculate . . . . *S. nemoralis*

9. Pubescence of leaves (upper and/or lower surfaces) conspicuous and of variable density but not short hirtellous and not exhibiting an unusual texture

11. Entire plant with a uniformly dense pubescence creating a grayish hue; leaf margins variable, but essentially more crenate than serrate . . . . . *S.hispida*

11. Plants much less pubescent; leaf margins variable, but essentially more serrate than crenate

12. All leaves strongly ovate to elliptic-ovate and possessing distinct petioles derived from strongly acuminate leaf bases; leaf pubescence long-hirsute and limited to the underside of leaves; upper leaf surface glabrous and smooth; leaf margins serrate with uniform and jagged-spreading teeth; stem zig-zags from nodes . . . . . *S. flexicaulis*

12. Leaves lanceolate to elliptic and not possessing strongly acuminate leaf bases; leaf pubescence hirsute and usually occurring on both surfaces of leaf blade; upper leaf surface sparsely pubescent and slightly rugose; leaf margins serrate or crenate but not uniformly jagged-spreading; stems straight . . . . . *S. ulmifolia*

4. Leaves with a prominent central nerve accompanied by two less conspicuous longitudinal nerves (triple-nerved)

13. All leaves strongly ovate to elliptic-ovate; larger leaves with strongly acuminate leaf bases . . . . . *S. drummondii*

13. All leaves lanceolate to oblanceolate and lacking acuminate leaf bases

14. Leaves possess a "lacquered" sheen and divergent teeth; leaves oblanceolate and long petiolate; heads few; flowers white . . . . . *S. ptarmicoides*

14. Not fitting the above criteria

15. Leaves extremely reduced up the stem and becoming bract-like; plants lacking fascicles of leaves in the axils of the upper stem leaves; found only on limestone and dolomite glades and

rocky prairies of the Ozarks region . . . . . *S. gattingeri*

15. Stem leaves maintaining an unexaggerated reduction in size from lower to upper stem and not becoming bract-like; plants often with fascicles of leaves in the axils of the upper stem leaves; found throughout the state in prairies, pastures and woods . . . . . *S. missouriensis*

1. Basal rosettes absent; leaves of the stem uniform in size or with larger (longer) leaves toward the middle of the stem (thus lowest leaves of the stem are the smallest or same size as the leaves found mid to mid-lower stem). note: shorter leaves of the lower stem may be few in number, dead or shriveled, thus requiring close examination.

16. Leaves conduplicate (folded along the midrib into two equal halves); leaves long linear and entire (margins scabrous) . . . . . *S. riddellii*

16. Leaves with flat, non-linear blades that are usually toothed; not obligate to wetlands

17. Leaves with a prominent central nerve accompanied by two less conspicuous longitudinal nerves (triple-nerved)

18. Stems glabrous

19. Axes of leaves (esp. upper stem) often with fascicles of smaller leaves; leaves narrowly lanceolate; plants of prairies, open woods, and fields throughout Missouri . . . . . *S. missouriensis*

19. Axes of leaves lacking fascicles of smaller leaves; leaves typically lance-elliptic to lanceolate; plants typically of moist habitats (i.e. along streams/alluvial soils) . . . . . *.S. gigantea*

18. Stems pubescent

20. Leaves with conspicuously acuminate bases; leaves broadly elliptic and more or less petiolate . . . . . *S. drummondii*

20. Leaves with obtuse or acute bases; leaves lanceolate to narrowly elliptic and sessile

21. Upper leaf surfaces with a subtle roughness; lower leaf surface exhibiting a velvety pubescence . . . . . *S. altissima*

21. Upper leaf surface with a conspicuously rough texture (like sandpaper); lower leaf surface lacking a velvety pubescence . . . . . *S. radula*

17. Leaves with a single prominent longitudinal nerve (single-nerved)

22. Leaves with minute depressed dots (hold leaf to light); leaves anise-scented (like black licorice) when bruised . . . . . *S. odora*
22. Leaves lacking minute depressions; leaves not anise-scented when bruised
    23. Leaves broadly elliptic to elliptic-ovate and possessing distinct petioles below abruptly acuminate leaf bases
        24. Stems densely pubescent; plants of bluffs and rocky outcroppings . . . . . *S. drummondii*
        24. Stems glabrous; plants of variable habitats . . . . . *S. flexicaulis*
    23. Leaves lanceolate to elliptic and not possessing abruptly acuminate leaf bases or distinct petioles
        25. Leaves distinctly rugose and slightly rounded at the base; lower stem leaves often distinctly scabrous . . . . . *S. rugosa*
        25. Leaves lightly wrinkled to smooth and tapering to the base; leaves occasionally slightly scabrous to completely glabrous
            26. Stems with a glaucous coating and a zig-zag pattern (esp. the upper 1/3 of the stem) . . . . . *S. caesia*
            26. Stem lacking a glaucous coating and a zig-zag pattern
                27. Leaves rather thick, firm, often lacking marginal serration, and with a slight metallic sheen as though "lacquered"; lower surface of leaves slightly scabrous to glabrous; stems with very short, uniformly bent hairs of variable density; widest leaves 14-20mm wide . . . . . *S. petiolaris*
                27. Leaves not especially thick or firm, usually with some degree of serration and without a "lacquered" sheen to the leaves; leaves hirsute below (at least on the veins); stem glabrous, tomentose or hirsute but not as above; widest leaves greater than 20mm wide
                    28. Stems conspicuously tomentose; lowest leaves of stem persistent and considerably shorter and narrower than middle and upper leaves; mid-stem leaves and above are +/- equal in size or only slightly reduced in size toward the top of the



Solidago altissima, photo by Steve Turner

stem; upper leaf surface with a relatively smooth texture . . . . . *S. buckleyi*

28. Stems glabrous to hirsute but never tomentose; lowest leaves of the stem are often deciduous (thus may have fallen off) and are equal to or larger than the middle and upper leaves of the stem; leaves from the middle of the stem up become noticeably reduced in size; upper leaf surface with a very subtly scabrous (scratchy) texture . . . . . *S. ulmifolia*



Solidago gattingeri, photo by Steve Turner



Solidago flexicaulis, photo by Steve Turner



Solidago petiolaris, photo by Steve Turner



Solidago riddellii, photo by Steve Turner

Plan It Native 2027

February 9 – 10, 2027

Anita B. Gorman Conservation Discovery Center & Kauffman Conference Center, Kansas City

Boasting regional and national native plant experts, the annual Plan It Native conference offers native plant education for enthusiasts and professionals. Enjoy two days of learning about native plants, designing and managing native plant gardens, and flora/fauna connections. The conference boasts nationally known keynote speakers and 21 robust concurrent sessions. Socialize with speakers, colleagues, and customers in our exhibit hall, during lunch breaks, and at the Tuesday evening social hour.

We have three great keynotes speakers for 2027 –

• Kim Eierman, ecological landscape designer and environmental horticulturist specializing in native plants and author of The Pollinator Victory Garden: Win the War on Pollinator Decline with Ecological Gardening.

• Benjamin Vogt, owner of Prairie Up and author of A New Garden Ethic: Cultivating Defiant Compassion for an Uncertain Future, as well as Prairie Up: An Introduction to Natural Garden Design. His forthcoming book is Unlawn America: A Grassroots Guide to Rewilding Your Yard

• Chris Helzer, Nebraska Director of Science and Stewardship for The Nature Conservancy and author of The Prairie Ecologist

Visit Plan It Native to learn more about all our speakers and purchase your ticket. Early Bird pricing is available through November 16.

From the Fall MONPS field trip: Western Star Flatwoods.

Photos by your editor











Join Us at Plan It Native!

Meet us in Kansas City for amazing, in-person discussions on native plant habitats for birds and pollinators, native landscapes maintenance, and much more. We can't wait to see you!

We offer two full days to learn about native plants and an evening reception to mingle with fellow enthusiasts. Our goal is to increase the appreciation, conservation, and use of native plants in the heartland.

Visit our Interactive Exhibit Hall highlighting native plants, pollinators, restoration efforts, and nature related merchandise.

Concurrent session topics will include:

- Native Landscaping Design & Maintenance
- Supporting Native Bees, Butterflies and Other Insects in our Ecosystems
- Prairie Restoration Projects
- Building Vibrant Communities with Native Plants
- Wildlife Conservation - Protecting What We Love
- and Much More!

REGISTER TODAY!

FEATURED SPEAKERS



Kim Eierman
Ecological Landscape Designer and Author



Benjamin Vogt
Owner of Prairie Up and Author



Chris Helzer
Nebraska Director of Science and Stewardship for The Nature Conservancy and Photographer

Hosted by Deep Roots KC
a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization
hello@deeprootskc.org
816-301-7545

Shop Online for Embroidered MONPS Logo Apparel

A new feature has been added to the MONPS website: from the "MONPS Logo Apparel" link on the menu bar of our home page (MONPS.org), you'll be able to access our online store. Short-sleeved and long-sleeved t-shirts, sweatshirts, and ball caps with embroidered MONPS logos are available in five colors. There's also a booney hat with embroidered logo, in dark brown. The tote bag has a direct-to-garment print of our logo. Our vendor, Fast Yowi, is located in Columbia, so you can pick up your order there if it's convenient, or have it shipped.

Seeking Donations for the Stan Hudson Research Grant

Could you help us support students who are conducting botanical research in Missouri? The Stan Hudson Research Grant is available to assist with funding for research projects conducted by college or university students under the supervision of a faculty member. The grant honors the late H. Stanton Hudson (1921–2002), a long-time member of the Missouri Native Plant Society whose passion for the flora of Missouri and its conservation inspired his friends and family to create a small grants program in his memory. The grant is usually given annually.

To learn more about the grant, check out this link to the **Missouri Native Plants website-Hudson Fund.**

Click here to make a donation to the Hudson Fund
Any amount is appreciated!

Not getting the Missouri Native Plant Society organizational emails?

Most email clients have a "safe senders" mechanism for you to make sure that your email server always sends mail from our MONPS server to your inbox.

*Some just have you add our server to your "Contacts"
*Some have you create "Rules".
*Some have an actual "Safe Senders/Domains" area in the settings.

To ensure that you get the organizational emails please add these two domains to whatever your email's "safe senders" process is: monps.org and webapps.monps.org

OR: You may simply need to update your email address with us. If so, click this link: https://monativeplants.org/ask-a-question/

From the Editor

Many thanks to our Assistant Editor, Pam Barnabee for getting everything in good shape before it came to me. Thanks also to our Board members who proofread each issue and all authors, chapter representatives, and other contributors. Please consider making a submission for a future Petal Pusher! Here is some information for submissions:

A. The theme for the January 2027 Petal Pusher is "Mosses and/or Lichens," but other submissions are encouraged, especially Genus or Family descriptions ("Better know a genus/family"), Conundrum Corner, Invasive Tip of the Month, Name Change of the Month, Terminology, and Poetry Corner.

B. Send ONE email saying "here is my contribution on_____," and attach (don't embed) the following:

1) an article in Word format with photo captions at the end (no photos in the Word document) and your name in the text.

2) Images, in JPEG format--NOT in a document file.

C. Use only one space between sentences

D. Even short notes with pictures would be great!

E. Send to: pamela.barnabee@gmail.com (don't send them directly to me!)

F. Due date for the next issue is: December 20

Thank you so much,
Michelle Bowe

Do You Have a Plant Story?

Learn more about Missouri native plants at the newest feature on the MONPS website (**MONPS.org**): Plant Stories. Do you have a favorite Missouri native plant? A photo you're particularly proud of? Please submit your story to pamela.barnabee@gmail.com for posting.

We Welcome Member Submissions!

The Petal Pusher wants YOU … to write articles for the newsletter.

Consider these possibilities:

-Conundrum Corner: Tips on how to distinguish between tricky, look-alike species.

-Invasive Tip of the Month: How to identify and eradicate a particular invasive species.

-What's Cooking: Recipes using native Missouri plants.

-Name Change of the Month: Latin names, they keep on a-changin'; help us all stay up-to-date.

-Poetry Corner or Quotation Corner: Give us your suggestions for poems or quotes, or submit your original poetry. (Note that for poems, we must have permission from the publisher.)

Chapter Reports and Events

PARADOXA

Article and photos by Edie Starbuck, Chapter Secretary

On October 10 the Paradoxa Chapter took advantage of the fine fall weather to visit "Edgar Prairie", a property owned by John and Elaine Edgar, south of Rolla. The property includes restored prairie, as well as woodlands and a glade. The chapter has visited almost annually for the past few years and this location never fails to impress visitors with its diversity. John reported that he and Elaine had found 14 species on the property in the past year that they had never seen before, adding to the approximately 400 species that they were aware of previously. The Paradoxa Chapter had recorded 122 species observations for this location over the years. President Pam Barnabee, brought along this list to check off observations and add to it.

The Edgars graciously provided paper bags and invited attendees to collect seeds if they wished. John led the walk for about two hours, to make sure that we saw species of special interest to him, including *Gentiana andrewsii* (closed gentian) and *Helianthus silphoides* (Ozark sunflower). The *H. silphoides* was a new discovery on the property this year and was probably the highlight of the day, especially since it would be the first record in Phelps County. In the end, we walked over two miles and spent three hours walking the property, adding 20 more species to the Paradoxa list. A fine day indeed!



Gentiana andrewsii



Helianthus silphoides

Upcoming Events

Saturday, November 6, 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The chapter's final activity of the year is our annual Seed Swap & Annual Meeting. Please note you don't need to bring seeds in order to participate! We also use the meeting to "collect" members' recommendations of books, apps, tools, websites, etc.; ideas for places we should visit in the coming year; and topics for workshops. Officers will be elected this year, for two-year terms. President Pam Barnabee, Secretary Edie Starbuck, and Chapter Representative Jerry Barnabee have agreed to stand for re-election. The office of Vice President is open. Please email paradoxarolla@gmail.com if you are interested in learning the duties involved or want to make a nomination for any of the offices. The chapter will provide pizza; please bring your own drink.



Linda Frederick and Pam Barnabee discuss the identification of a goldenrod.

ST LOUIS

by Len Meier, Chapter Representative

The St Louis Chapter held regular monthly meetings throughout the summer 2026. At the September meeting, Dr. Robbin Moran presented "Ferntastic Missouri Ferns"; an exposé of strange botanical characteristics found in Missouri ferns. All presentations from our meetings are available on the MONPS website at https://monativeplants.org/monps-webinars/. The last meeting of the year was October 15, where members made short presentations on botanical subjects, and shared photos, stories and snacks, including, among other things, homemade cookies and warm jalapeño bread. All the presenters had very different approaches and that too was interesting. Twenty-five people attended including two who had not attended in the past.

The September and October meetings were chaired by our new President, Caity Sims, with assistance by our new Vice-President, Ben Berger.

Botany Hikes:

The St. Louis Chapter, had a very good turnout at the September State Field Trips in the Rolla area. Members



St. Louis Chapter members Caity Sims, Kathy Bildner, Nicholas Clemens and David Bogler at Bringing Conservation Home Expo at Tower Grove Park.

continued to participate in the Webster Groves Nature Study Society Monday botany hikes. In addition, the chapter held a weekend hike at the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary in West Alton Missouri.

On October 24, the St Louis Chapter attended a hike at Klondike County Park led by Michael Laschober. The hike theme was trees, oak trees in particular. Michael did a quick introduction to the park, and to the oaks of Missouri, followed by a hike through this recovering sandstone quarry. Asters and goldenrods were the primary blooming plants. Black oak, sycamore, red cedar, cottonwood and numerous shrubs and vines were observed.



Michael Laschober discussing silica sand mined at this quarry, photo by K. Bildner

Tabling Events

St. Louis Chapter members worked our MONPS display at several educational events this quarter including the Bringing Conservation Home Expo at Tower Grove Park, and another at Shaw Nature Reserve at Gray Summit. Turnout at both events was very good and we gathered contact information for many inter-

ested people who will receive information on future chapter events.



Michael discussing red oaks, photo by K. Bildner



Michael discussing white oaks, photo by K. Bildner

Planning for 2027

The St Louis Chapter officers will hold one or two open planning meetings during the October-December time period to lay out plans for 2027 activities. Meetings will resume in January 2027.

Open Invitation

Everyone is welcome to attend our meetings and hikes. If you wish to learn more, feel free to contact us.

Contact Info:

Len Meier, Chapter Representative
636-795-0804, lxmeier.meier@gmail.com

HAWTHORN

by Elena Vega, Chapter Representative_

Upcoming Events

Sunday, November 15, 1:00 p.m. Wreath Making Workshop at Hill Creek Fiber, 7001 South Hill Creek Road, Columbia. Look for Hill Creek Fiber on the mailbox by the last house in the valley before you reach the creek. Please drive to the back for parking. Grapevines will be available to create the wreath and pine needles and pinecones will be available to decorate your wreath. Bring your own ribbons and other decorative details.
Please rsvp to Carol Leigh at 573-874-2233.

Thursday, November 19, 11:30 a.m. Hawthorn Third Thursday Lunch, Love Coffee at 15 Business Loop. This event is open to any and all, so please bring family and friends.
We discuss native plants and members exchange seeds.

Monday, December 8. Hawthorn Chapter Meeting with Elections for Chapter President & Secretary. The Chapter President leads our meetings, and the Chapter Secretary takes meeting minutes. Meeting location TBD.

Missouri Native Plant Society Membership Form

Name	
Address	
City, State, ZIP	
Phone	
Email	

Membership Type (circle one): New Member Renewing Member

Membership Period (circle one): *1 2 3 4 5 year(s)*

Membership Level (check one):

	Student	$5
	Goldenrod	$10
	Sunflower	$25
	Bluebell	$50
	Blazing Star	$100

Chapter dues (optional, check all that apply):

	Hawthorn (Columbia)	$5
	Kansas City	$5
	Osage Plains (Clinton)	$5
	Paradoxa (Rolla)	$5
	Perennis (Cape Girardeau)	$5
	Saint Louis	$5
	Southwest (Springfield)	$5

Newsletter Delivery (normal delivery is via email):

	Check here if you prefer to receive your newsletters via postal mail!	$10

Other contributions (optional, check all that apply, specify amount, tax deductible):

	Hudson Grant Fund	
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Total:

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To contact the Missouri Native Plant Society, please **click the "Have a Question" link** on our website.

"We can't just hope for a brighter day, we have to work for a brighter day." — Dolly Parton