

Juncus tenuis, path rush

by Gary Plunkett

Family: Juncaceae

A Rush to Judgment

Path rush was one of the early, native wild plants I learned to identify, probably before I knew what a bract or achene is. Walk leaders would identify this scruffy little thing, and explain how to differentiate the three graminoids – grasses, sedges, and rushes. Discovering this plant, so commonly hidden in plain sight, and getting exposed to botany-speak was pretty cool to a neophyte wild plant enthusiast.

It was years later, when path rush appeared at the edges of my woodland, that I began to observe it up close and personal, and recognize its quiet virtues. Amazing how much better they look when not beaten down by foot traffic – a nice reward for letting nature express itself and taking the time to observe detail.

Juncus tenuis is not picky about where it takes up residence. It will find its way into open woodlands, thickets, pastures, roadsides – just about any kind of unkept area. It does seem to prefer locales that are wet in winter, but dry out during the growing season. It flourishes in disturbed habitats with compacted soil, which of course would be – *paths!* This is where there is less competition from other species, so path rush sprawls out by self-seeding and rhizomatous growth. And it's where one might see lawn-like patches, because foot traffic keeps it beat down.

One hardly notices the narrow leaf blades of path rush packed in around its base. It's clusters of flowering stems (*culms*) that catch the eye. So, “rushes are round” as the saying goes, but the wiry little stems of path rush sometimes break that rule of thumb. They are often ovoid in cross section, at least enough to feel slight bumps when rolled between the fingers.

In late spring, greenish-brown terminal flower clusters appear atop the 12 to 18 inch stems, about 8 florets per cluster. Slender bracts extend at a narrow angle, 4 inches or so beyond the flower. (Figure 1) In late summer the wind-pollinated florets will form brownish capsules that split into three small compartments containing tiny, dust-like seeds.

Path rush will never be a specimen addition to a garden. Even a dense population can disappear into the background – exactly where it belongs. They really *are* a background species, creating context among which main characters are viewed. That is not to say path rush

Figure 1. Brown Fruit. Photo by Glen Mittelhauser



is totally without interest. A patch of it with its layer of wispy bracts will fill voids with interesting texture.

So, *Juncus tenuis* is not an attention-grabber. It can, however, have a place in one's kept garden, as advocated in this post on the Illinois Wildflowers website blog: "Why would anyone consider this cute little ground cover a weed? It isn't invasive, it fills in nicely between plants in a medium to wet garden (such as a rain garden or low-lying perennial garden) and is diminutive in size. It seems to be one of those filler plants that don't get the respect they deserve because they're easy to grow, but they do the job of filling space and supporting the neighbors, while keeping out the weeds. Great little plant."

Cultivation

Path rush seeds are available from several online sources, and should be planted in full sun or lightly shaded areas with wet to mesic soil. Landscaping uses include rain gardens,

small patch ground covers, rock garden, and of course, pathway borders. They are also good additions to rain gardens around showy plants, such as swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), cardinal flower, (*Lobelia cardinalis*), or blue iris (*Iris versicolor*).

One may not need seeds if there is a wild area somewhere nearby. Path rush is a common "walk-on," and likes to wander into secret spots reserved for "nongardening," perhaps an out-of-sight repository of discarded biomass, full of mosses, lichens, centipedes, sow bugs, and the hidden microbiome of working ecosystems – perfect for the volunteer path rush! From there, clumps can be divided and replanted at will.

Yes, path rush is a "great little plant." And I should add, it is *never* a target of deer browsing!

Sources:

<https://gobotany.newenglandwild.org/species/juncus/tenuis/>

<http://www.newmoonnursery.com/plant/Juncus-tenuis>

http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/grasses/plants/path_rush.htm

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=q200>



Path Rush (*Juncus tenuis*). Photo by Arie Tal

Illustrator: Christiaan Sepp



Rhode Island Wild Plant Society

PO Box 888, N. Kingstown, RI 02852

401.789.7497 • office@riwps.org

www.RIWPS.org