

Compass Plant---A Marvelous Native

Kevin Milaeger



Kevin Milaeger

Blooming now in my garden is a fantastic native, the Compass Plant, botanically known as *Silphium laciniatum*. This is truly one of those plants that always elicits a "Wow" when discovered for the first time, and truthfully, I am still wowed by it.



This plant is in the asteraceae, or daisy, family. Therefore the flower is daisy-like, solid yellow (not gold) and about 3" across. Monarch butterflies love it. Flowers appear in clusters atop stems of varying height, about 6' tall this year. Some years it is taller. The stem is unlike any flower stem I



can think of. It is covered with stiff hairs, though it is not prickly. Coarse might be the best word to describe it. It is very hard, almost like a piece of wood, about 3/4" thick at the base. It seems so durable; I suspect Native Americans may have had an ethnobotanical use for the stem.

At the base of the plant is a 60" wide clump of about forty huge leaves. This year, the largest leaf I measured is 35" long and 27" wide. The leaves are deeply incised, and heavily veined. Their surface texture is like sandpaper. There are leaves all the way up the sturdy stems, getting progressively smaller as you go up. The leaves make a great cut decoration----one leaf makes a real statement. These huge leaves are oriented in the north/south position, more or less, hence the common name. Early settlers observed this phenomenon and named the plant accordingly. This character



water transpiration from and the subsequent desiccation is one of the taller prairie plants. Compass Plant is a summer sun. Compass Plant is a favorite of prairie folks standing on their horses' backs so they could see over the tall grasses, searching for a Compass Plant. If they spied one, they would go to it, and check its leaves to get their bearings...or so the story goes. I think they probably carried a real compass in their pocket, just in case they couldn't find a Compass Plant.

The Compass Plant is hardy to zone 3. It grows throughout the Midwest, and even north of Lake Superior. It is long lived, but a newly planted young plant may take several years to bloom, so be patient. Its tap root can reach down fourteen feet.



I always suspected that because of the sandpaper-like leaves, deer would not eat this plant. However, J. Robert Smith in his 1980 book 'The Prairie Garden' says "grazing animals like it." The USDA also states that horses and cattle will eat it, but having rubbed the rough leaf over my hand many times, I can't help but think there would be other plants they would rather eat. With its sandpaper leaves, the Compass Plant is definitely not a "comfort food." As flowering diminishes at summer's end, the leaves dry and turn beige or brown, twisting artfully. The goldfinch then visit to partake of the plentiful seed. I like to take some of the seed and toss it in waste areas where, with any luck, it will take hold---more people need to be wowed by this stunning native beauty.