

Knowing Our Natives: Compass Plant

It's said that across the tallgrass prairies of North America, people once found their way in the dark by reaching out to touch the charismatic compass plant, whose leaves could always help a wanderer reorient themselves. The compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*), also known as pilotweed, polarplant, gum weed, and cut-leaf silphium, is one notable member of a prairie family stretching across the Eastern United States and Ontario, down south to New Mexico. This plant has deep roots, bright and sunny yellow flowers, and a long history.



The latin name *Silphium* is used for a genus of plants also known as rosinweeds, and originates in Ancient Greece. Historically, there was a North African plant which secreted a gum, used for both food and medicine, called silphium. This plant's identity is now lost, but rosinweeds have been named for their similar secretion of resinous sap. The sap of the compass plant has been dried and chewed as a gum to cleanse teeth and freshen breath for centuries by Native Americans of the American plains, hence the nickname 'gum weed'.



Additionally, it was used to make a medicine by the Pawnee, and several tribes burn the dried root during lightning for good luck. Perhaps most importantly is the sense of direction the plant provides - it isn't called compass plant for nothing! When new leaves start growing, they face random directions, but over two to three weeks, they'll reorient their leaves so the tips face north-south and the leaf blades face east-west. For the plant, this helps minimize water loss on sunny days.

The compass plant is valued in its native prairie ecosystem, with a 10 foot deep taproot preventing soil erosion, its sunflower-like blooms attract pollinators, and its foliage has "tickled the bellies of the buffalo," as the naturalist Aldo Leopold wrote in the July entry of *A Sand County Almanac*.

More than just finding your way home, this plant may be able to find its way into your heart as well.