

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Common evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*)

Plant family: Evening primrose (*Onagraceae*)



Common evening primrose — AKA king’s cure-all, sundrops or evening star — is a 2- to 6-foot-tall herbaceous biennial of sunny sites. The lemon-scented flowers open in the evening and stay open until early morning — longer on cloudy days. With bright yellow blooms appearing from June to November, it’s one of the latest native-flowering plants in Minnesota. It attracts hummingbirds and an array of pollinators. Goldfinches and other birds eat its seeds.

Plant Stats

STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS: FACU

PRIMARY USES: Prairie restorations/gardens; pollinator/wildlife habitat

Right: Pollinated by moths and bees, common evening primrose’s lemon-scented flowers open in the evening.

Photo: Dave Hanson, Minnesota Department of Transportation
Above: Seed capsules, which contain up to 400 seeds, are easily identifiable in winter. Photos: Paul Erdmann

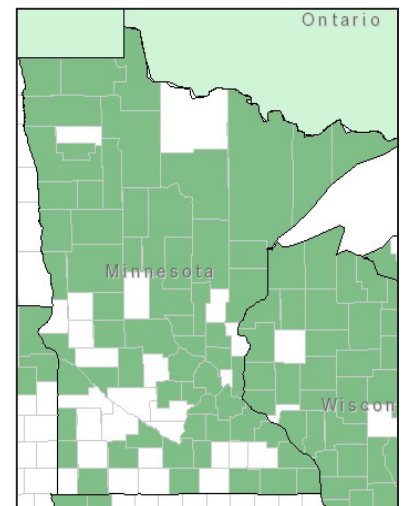
Identification

Common evening primrose is a biennial, producing a basal rosette in Year 1. In Year 2, the plant sends up a floral spike, goes to seed and then dies. New plants begin from seed. Fragrant flowers up to 2 inches wide open from bottom to top of a stiff, terminal spike. Four yellow, heart-shaped petals and eight yellow stamens surround a style with a cross-shaped stigma in the center. Four greenish-yellow, variously hairy sepals grow up to 1.25 inches long. Lanceolate leaves

grow up to 8 inches long and 2 inches wide, tapering to point. Leaves are slightly rough, hairless or with fine white hairs; sometimes toothless or with small teeth. Plants can produce single or multiple stems, which are covered in white hairs. Long, narrow seed pods split to release up to 400 small, reddish-brown irregular seeds. Wind disbursts the seeds, which can remain viable for 70 years. Woody stems and seed capsules often persist through winter.

Range

Common evening primrose is found in gardens, prairies, old fields, roadsides, disturbed areas and other sunny sites throughout most of Minnesota. Records of its presence do not exist from a handful of counties, mostly in the southwest. It prefers full sun, average to dry moisture and well-drained soil.



Range map source: USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database

Uses

Found in prairie restorations and seed mixes, common evening primrose may be a good choice for large, informal gardens. Due to its biennial growth form, it is rarely aggressive. It attracts pollinators including moths, honeybees, bumblebees and miner bees. Sphinx moths find it particularly appealing. It is a host plant for the larvae of several moth species, which feed on the foliage. Other foliage-feeders include several beetle species, including the invasive Japanese beetle.



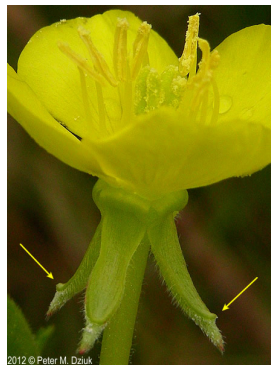
Common evening primrose grows in a prairie restoration in Bloomington. **Photo Credit:** Paul Erdmann

Hummingbirds feed on the nectar; other birds eat the seeds. Native Americans

used parts of the plant for food and medicine. Most parts are edible. It's sold

as a dietary supplement. In some countries, it's grown commercially for oil.

Similar Species



From left: Common evening primrose has heart-shaped petals. **Photo Credit:** Paul Erdmann; Northern evening primrose, *Oenothera parviflora*, is easily confused with common evening primrose, but *O. parviflora* flowers have a small ridge or knob just below the sepal tips. **Photo Credit:** Peter Dziuk, Minnesota Wildflowers; Four-point evening primrose (*Oenothera rhombipetala*) grows at Bunker Hills Regional Park in Anoka County. **Photo Credit:** Dave Hanson, Minnesota Department of Transportation

Two varieties of *O. biennis* grow in Minnesota: *var. canescens* is more densely covered in curved hairs, few if any of them glandular; *var. biennis* is less hairy with some gland-tipped hairs. Common

evening primrose looks similar to Northern evening primrose, *Oenothera parviflora*, which is distinguished by a small ridge or knob just below its sepal tips. Common evening primrose usually

produces larger flowers. But some overlap exists in flower size and range in Minnesota. The four other native, yellow-flowering *Oenothera* species are shorter and quite different.

Planting Options

Seeds and potted plants are available at some native plant nurseries.

References

<https://www.friendsofthewildflowergarden.org/pages/plants/eveningprimrose.html>

<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/common-evening-primrose>

https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/cm_primrosex.htm