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.

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 disperses 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.
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. 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

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

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