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Native Flora

Native Grasses For Landscaping

OUR NATIVE grasses have often been overlooked as landscaping plants because most people aren't familiar with the graceful beauty of grasses. Here are brief descriptions of these plants to acquaint you with the sizes, shapes and colors. Unless noted, most are prairie grasses that grow in clumps, full sun and a wide range of soils--good characteristics for landscaping.

Plant taller grasses for a dramatic accent or in large meadow plantings. Shorter grasses are good backdrops to set off perennials in flower beds or work well in smaller meadow plantings. In winter, the warm reds, oranges and golds of native grasses become intensified when wet.



BIG BLUESTEM (*Andropogon gerardii*) is a dramatic 5-8 feet tall, clump-forming grass which grows in a wide range of soils. In mid-August, big blue produces its distinctive three-parted seed heads which resemble a turkey's foot; its other name. The bluish to purplish stems turn an attractive reddish-copper color after frost. Big bluestem occasionally topples in winter.



LITTLE BLUESTEM (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) is the most widely used grass for landscaping wildflower beds and meadows, because it will not overshadow the wildflowers. The blue to green leaves and stems of the 2-4 foot grass turn the deepest russet of all the natives. This color, accented by silvery white seed heads in fall, is unforgettable.



INDIAN GRASS (*Sorghastrum nutans*) is another tall prairie grass growing 5 to 7 feet. Its distinction is a large golden silky plume which follows yellow flowers in late summer. Indian grass turns golden in fall.



PRAIRIE DROPSEED (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) with its arching fine leaves can be thought of as a miniature fountain grass. This grass is considered by many as the most handsome of the prairie grasses. The seed heads, filled with small round seeds, are on 2' to 4' long stalks. Winter color is light tan.



BROOMSEGE (*Andropogon virginicus*) (left) and **ELLIOTT'S BROOMSEGE (*Andropogon elliottii*) (right)** are compact grasses growing 2 to 3 feet tall that turn orange in fall and remain standing throughout the winter. Broomsedge is commonly seen in abandoned fields. The leaves of Elliott's broomsedge around the seed heads are wider than those of broomsedge. Both prefer acid soil.



SPLITBEARD BLUESTEM (*Andropogon ternarius*) during the summer looks very much like broomsedge, but in fall turns a rich russet which remains colorful through winter like little bluestem. The fluffy silver seed heads are scattered over the length of each stem and make this an outstanding ornamental grass.



SWITCH GRASS (*Panicum virgatum*) is another of the major prairie grasses and turns golden yellow in the fall. It is the most resistant of the native grasses to ice and snow. When purchasing switch grass, choose the native rather than the more aggressive cultivated varieties such as cave-in-rock, Kanlow or Blackwell. Native switch grass grows 2 to 3 feet with large loose seed heads. Switch grass typically grows in wetter soils, but is found in all but the driest of soils.



EASTERN GAMA (*Tripsacum dactyloides*) plants form large circles with broad leaves. When planted close together, eastern gama makes an impressive hedge or screen. Its unusual seed heads look like a primitive sort of corn. The large seeds are atop of 4 to 8 feet stalks. This grass turns an orange-pink in the fall. The foliage "melts" down forming small hummocks over winter.



PRAIRIE CORD GRASS (*Spartina pectinata*) is the dominant grass of wet prairies and sloughs. Its gracefully arching leaves turn bright yellow in fall. Unlike other clump-forming native grasses, cord grass spreads aggressively by rhizomes and is best used to stabilize pond edges and stream sides.



CANADA WILD RYE (*Elymus canadensis*), VIRGINIA WILD RYE

(*Elymus virginicus*) and BOTTLEBRUSH GRASS (*Elymus hystrix*) are cool season grasses that green up early in spring and remain green in all but the driest of summers. The curving, drooping seed heads of wild rye resemble cultivated rye. Bottlebrush grass seed heads look just like a stiff bottlebrush. All grow in shade to full sun and turn whitish-tan in winter.




RIVER OATS (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) grows 2-3 feet tall with clusters of attractive, flattened seed heads that are wonderful in dried arrangements. It grows in shade to part sun and has wiry rhizomatous roots that make it ideal for streamside planting as well as in flowerbeds.



SIDEOATS GRAMA (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) and **BLUE GRAMA** (*Bouteloua gracilis*) are shorter grasses to consider for meadow plantings. Sideoats grama has attractive seed stalks with oat-like seeds that hang to one side of the stem. Blue grama seed stalks have 1 to 3 curved spikes.

BUFFALO GRASS (*Buchloe dactyloides*) is currently enjoying a revival as a lawn grass. Researchers are developing new varieties of this short, sod-forming grass to fit a wider range of conditions. Buffalo grass is a warm-season grass that requires less maintenance than the traditional cool season lawn grasses.

When selecting grasses for landscaping, avoid using such invasive exotic grasses as reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) Caucasian or Australian bluestem (*Bothriochloa bladhii*), Johnsongrass (*Sorghum halpense*), tall fescue (*Festuca elatior*) or quack grass (*Elymus repens*).

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