

GRASSES

Bluestem, Big 'Bonilla'

Andropogon gerardii 'Bonilla'

Native. Major component of tallgrass prairie. Produces "turkey foot" seed heads. Plants turn red in the fall and remain upright in winter. Excellent cattle food. Grows 3-7 feet tall.

Description: This warm-season, perennial tallgrass has short scaly rhizomes. Coarse seed stalks reach 3 to 7 feet. Each stalk produces one or more hairy, 3 to 6 fingered "turkey foot" spikes, typically 1-1/2 to 4 inches long. Leaves are numerous, large, 1/4 to 1/2 inch wide, usually with coarse hairs. Plants remain green throughout the summer, turning rusty red with maturity.

Distribution/Habitat: Big bluestem, a North American native, occurs in all states except in the far West. Its primary range is the central and southern plains where it typifies lowland tallgrass communities. It is found statewide in South Dakota, abundantly in the eastern part on unbroken soils as well as in the Sandhills. Farther west in the state it occupies small protected areas with favorable soil moisture.

Comments: Big bluestem, or turkeyfoot, was the dominant species of the tallgrass prairie. It is excellent in quality, quantity, and palatability. Abundance quickly decreases with frequent mowing or heavy grazing pressure, although it proves remarkably resilient when pressure is removed. It is frequently seeded for prairie restoration; 'Champ,' 'Pawnee,' 'Bison,' and 'Bonilla' are recommended varieties.

Credit: James E. Johnson & Gary E. Larson, Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains. SDSU, Brookings, SD. B-566 (rev.) August 1999. Page 18.

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Indiangrass 'Tomahawk'

Sorghastrum nutans 'Tomahawk'

Native. Major component of tall grass prairie. Grows best on moist soil. Produces seeds in large, fluffy terminal panicles. Interesting landscape plant.

Grows 3-6 ft tall.



Description: Indiangrass is a warm-season, perennial tallgrass, 2 to 6 feet, made bunchy with short rhizomes. Rather dense, golden-yellowish, lance-shaped panicles are 4 to 12 inches long on erect culms. Leaves are rather stiff and straight, arising from the stems at acute angles. Prominent vertical projections are located on both sides of the ligule. Leaves are lighter green than those of big bluestem, a common associate.

Distribution/Habitat: Indiangrass is found in southeast Canada, through much of the central and eastern United States, and into Mexico. It is absent west of the Great Plains. It is most commonly associated with big bluestem in deep soils of the eastern Great Plains. In South Dakota it occurs in the east, in the Sandhills of the southwest, and occasionally in Black Hills foothills.

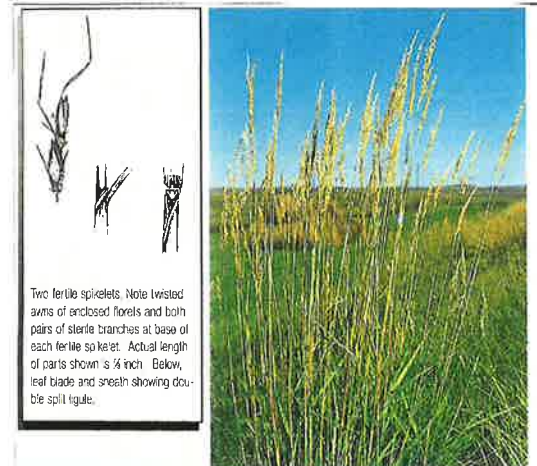
Comments: Indiangrass is a favorite native forage of grazing livestock and makes excellent hay if cut before flower stalks develop, producing almost as much forage as big bluestem. In recent years it has been seeded in mixtures with other native tallgrasses in eastern fields for erosion control, grazing, and grassland restoration. Adapted cultivars are 'Holt' and 'Tomahawk.' Seeds are used sparingly by upland game birds, finches, juncos, and field and tree sparrows. Meadow and pocket mice make some use of seed. The Lakota name for Indiangrass translates to "red grass with fluffy light-colored end."

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Two fertile spikelets. Note twisted awns of enclosed florets and both pairs of sterile branches at base of each fertile spikelet. Actual length of parts shown is 1/4 inch. Below, leaf blade and sheath showing double split ligule.

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Switchgrass 'Dacotah'

Panicum virgatum

Native. Tall, warm-season perennial sod grass. Seedhead is an airy panicle. Turns golden yellow in fall/winter. Usually remains upright during winter. Birds make some use of seeds. Grows 3-5 ft. tall

Description: Switchgrass is a tall, warm-season, perennial sod grass. Rather large teardrop-shaped Spikelets are borne in open panicles 6 to 18 inches long on coarse stems up to 40 inches tall. Identification is simplified by a V-shaped patch of hair on the upper surface of the leaf blade near the stem. Leaves, up to 2 feet long, are abundant. Tight, large clumps form from numerous scaly rhizomes.

Distribution/Habitat: Switchgrass, a native decreaser, grows in central and eastern Canada, all states except five in the far West and Northwest, and in Central and South America, reaching its greatest abundance in uplands and lowlands of the Tallgrass Prairie. In native stands, switchgrass grows in proximity to big bluestem, prairie Cordgrass, Canada wildrye, and Indiangrass. In South Dakota switchgrass is primarily found in the east but is present in western ravines, extensively in the Sandhills and Black Hills.

Comments: Farming and grazing have reduced switchgrass. It is the favored grass for seeding warm-season upland pastures in central and eastern South Dakota. When used in prairie restoration, other tall grasses and forbs are included. Varieties most common to South Dakota are 'Nebraska 28,' 'Pathfinder,' 'Trailblazer,' 'Dacotah,' 'Forestburg,' and 'Sunburst.' Although not as palatable as some grasses, switchgrass is consumed by livestock as long as stems are green. It is extremely productive with controlled grazing. With careful management, switchgrass makes excellent yields of good quality hay. It provides excellent cover for nesting birds and usually remains standing in winter to serve as good winter cover. Birds make some use of seeds.

Credit: James E. Johnson & Gary E. Larson, Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains. SDSU, Brookings, SD. B-566 (rev.) August 1999. Page 50.

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