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“Helping Others Grow”

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SMG's Grow Native!

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Last year in the November issue of Sunnyside Thymes, Jean Wolfe told us about Chinese Silver grass, an invasive species. A great native alternative to Chinese Silver Grass is **Prairie Dropseed**, one of my favorite plants.

I live in the woods and have little full sun and am limited in what I can grow that requires much sun. Needless to say, growing grasses is a challenge in my landscape. I have one rather small spot that receives at least 4 hours of sun and is sandy and therefore dry much of the time. I started a mini-native prairie there a few years ago. Plants such as rattlesnake master, blazing star, goldenrod and grey-headed coneflower thrive there.

However, the plant I love most in my mini prairie is Prairie Dropseed. It is a low-growing clumping grass with a graceful form that provides year-round interest in the garden.

Prairie Dropseed, *Sporobolus heterolepis*, is a warm season grass native to the tallgrass and mixed grass prairies of central North America that is also a popular low-maintenance ornamental landscape plant in zones 3 to 9.

It is clump-forming, perennial grass with fine-textured, hair-like, medium green leaves that typically form an arching foliage mound up to 15" tall and 18" wide. The foliage turns golden with orange hues in fall, fading to light bronze in winter. It resists flattening by snow so this plant can provide winter interest if you don't cut it back until spring.

Branching flower panicles up to 30-36" tall appear on slender stems above the foliage in late summer. The flowers have pink and brown tints but are probably most noted for their unique fragrance (hints of coriander). The seed heads give the appearance of a cloud over the foliage. Tiny rounded mature seeds drop to the ground from their hulls in



autumn, hence the common name of dropseed.

Grow Prairie Dropseed in full sun in most types of well-drained soil. Although it prefers dry, rocky soils it does fine in heavy clay, too. There are no serious insect or plant problems. It is not favored by deer (although it may be grazed) and is tolerant of juglone so it can thrive around black walnuts.

You can use Prairie Dropseed in perennial or mixed borders, naturalistic plantings, meadows, and restored prairies. It is a good addition to rain gardens and aids in erosion control.

Its fine, flowing appearance is a good contrast to plants with bold foliage or upright form. It makes a great filler between many types of herbaceous perennials, but especially those native to prairies, too, such as purple coneflower, small goldenrods, liatris, black-eyed Susan, and butterfly weed. Planted in large masses it can be used as a tall ground cover or can be used to create a distinctive border, but it can also be used as an accent specimen plant. It is particularly nice when positioned so the flower and seed heads are backlit.

It was named a Plant of Merit by the Missouri Botanical Garden in 2005 and was selected as the Wisconsin Nursery and Landscape Association's herbaceous perennial of the year in 2018.

McCoy Nursery in Charlestown sells Prairie Dropseed as well other native plants. Dropseed Nursery in Goshen, Ky also carries it. I'm not aware of other local nurseries selling it but it may be worth your time to call them and find out. And while you are it, encourage them to offer native plants.



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Sources:

- <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=f680>
- <https://wimastergardener.org/article/prairie-dropseed-sporobolus-heterolepis/>
- https://web.extension.illinois.edu/grasses/prairie_dropseed.cfm