
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

Volume 32, Issue 12

“Helping Others Grow”

December 2023

Know Your Natives

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Native Grasses

Instead planting the invasive maiden grass varieties (*Miscanthus sinensis*) when adding ornamental grasses to your landscape, try one of these 6 natives instead.

- **Big bluestem** (*Andropogon gerardii*) In good soil it self-seeds and establishes a strong root system but is slower than some grasses. It adds a pop of color to landscapes throughout the year – green with red edges in the summer, and reddish-bronze with lavender tones in the fall. It flowers in the late summer with small purple panicles. This grass is 3/8 inch wide with stems which run between 4 and 8 feet tall. It can tolerate some shade but is happiest in full sun. Once it is established it is drought-tolerant. It can handle a wide range of soils but does not like high alkaline or poor draining compacted soils.
- **Little bluestem** (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) It also does well in poor soils. Its blades are green with a touch of blue at the base which turn bronze in the fall. Purple flower panicles appear in August, followed by a white seed head that persists into winter. This grass only grows to between 2 and 4 feet tall with 1/4-inch wide leaves. It too does best in full sun and has good drought resistance once established.
- **Switchgrass** (*Panicum virgatum*) It is noted for its stiff vertical form throughout the year. It grows in average medium to wet soils in full sun



Big bluestem
photo: Purdue

to part shade. It grows in clumps but will spread by slightly creeping rhizomes. It features green leaves which turn yellow-orange in the fall. Mid-summer blooms are fine, pink, branched flower panicles which hover over the clump at heights up to 6 feet. It can tolerate some drought but is susceptible to rust in hot and humid summers.

- **Prairie dropseed** (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) This native grass grows well in average dry to medium well-drained soils in full sun. It can handle clay soils but prefers dry, rocky soils. It is slow growing and slow to establish but is drought tolerant. It forms clumps which have fine-textured, green leaves only 1/16 inch wide. Leaves turn golden in the fall. Flower panicles appear on slender stems which rise well above the clumps in the late summer to 3 feet. Flowers have pink and brown tints. The mature seeds drop to the ground from their hulls in the fall (hence its name) but it does not self-seed.
- **Indiangrass** (*Sorghastrum nutans*) Easy to grow in a wide range of well-drained soils this grass does well in poor, dry, infertile soils. It can self-seed in the best conditions. It has an upright form and forms clumps of blue-green leaves that are 1/2-inch wide. Leaves turn orange-yellow in the fall. Stiff flowing stems are topped with narrow, feathery, light brown panicles highlighted with yellow stamens, rise above the clumps in late summer up to 6 feet.
- *Continued*



Prairie dropseed
Photo: Purdue

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- **Sideoats grama** (*Bouteloua curtipenda*) Another easy to grow native, it prefers full sun and will self-seed in good conditions. Its name means that it has oat-like seed spikes which hang from one side of its flowering stems. The blades are bluish-gray about 1/4-inch wide. They turn golden with hints of orange and red in the fall. Purple flowers appear on arching stems above the clump in mid-summer up to 3 feet tall.

Sources:

- missouribotanicalgarden.com
 - indiananativeplants.org
 - plants.usda.gov
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