

Get To Know Your Native Prairie Grasses

Lewis and Clark encountered these prairie grasses in their journey to the Pacific Ocean. Native grasses provide habitat for animals and ground nesting birds like quail and ring-necked pheasant.

1) Big bluestem (Turkeyfoot)

Andropogon gerardii

This grass can reach 10 feet in height in favorable sites and is another important tallgrass prairie species. Big bluestem is an important component of a tallgrass prairie, with roots reaching up to 12 feet deep into the soil. It can be found along roadsides and in prairies. Big bluestem flowers from mid July to mid September.

2) Little bluestem

Schizachyrium scoparium

This grass can reach up to 4 ½ feet in height, with roots just as long. It can be found along roadsides and in prairies. During winter, birds utilize the seeds from this species as food. Little bluestem flowers from August to October.

3) Switchgrass

Panicum virgatum

This grass can reach up to 6 feet tall, with roots reaching nearly 8 feet deep. It can be found along roadsides, stream banks, and most wet and moist prairie areas. Switchgrass flowers from late July to early September.

4) Side-oats grama

Bouteloua curtipendula

This grass can reach a height of 3 feet and can be found in some roadsides and in most dry prairies and Loess Hill prairie types. Side-oats grama flowers from mid June to early July.

5) Canada wild rye

Elymus canadensis

This grass can reach a height of 4 feet, with roots reaching nearly as deep. It can be found in some roadsides and in most prairies. This species favors disturbed soils, and is often used as a cover crop in reconstructing prairies. Canada wild rye flowers from mid July to mid August.

6) Indian grass

Sorghastrum nutans

This grass can reach 8 feet tall with roots reaching 10 feet deep. It can be found along roadsides, in prairies, and open places. Indian grass is capable of invading stable non prairie areas, and is one of the most important tallgrass prairie species. It is relished by livestock, and flourishes from occasional flooding and repeated burning. Indian grass flowers from August to September.

Today, these species are used to create CRP grounds. The Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management (IRVM) teams in many Iowa counties also use these grasses to restore roadsides to native grasses and forbs. These practices serve a dual purpose: prairie restoration and erosion control.