



NORTH AMERICAN
NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

*Dedicated to the study,
conservation, cultivation,
and restoration
of North America's
native flora*

Easy-to-grow
Native Grasses
Eastern North America

The grass family, *Gramineae*, is one of the largest and most widespread families of flowering plants — yes, *flowering* plants — in the world. The grass family has the third largest number of species globally, after the Orchid and Daisy families (*Orchidaceae* and *Compositae* respectively).

Grass flowers are so tiny you may never have noticed them. In fact, grasses have evolved without colourful or scented sepals and petals to attract pollinators. They rely on wind pollination. Each tiny flower is enclosed in a bract, which looks like a scale. The flowers are clustered together in a spike.

Along with one-quarter of all flowering plants, grasses are monocotyledons. This means they sprout with one seed leaf or cotyledon and the leaves have parallel veins.

Grasses are distinctive because they continue to grow after being cut. Growth arises from the base up, like a fingernail, rather than unfolding from the bud. This is an adaptation to grazing. They have jointed stems and a complex but subtle flower structure.

The stems are hollow except at the point where the leaf is attached. Look closely at the stem and you will notice that most are round.

Grasses evolved during the Cenozoic era, 65 million years ago, and today can be found worldwide in all types of ecosystems. In fact, they are the most numerous plant type found in Arctic regions.

Far from boring, grasses offer colour, texture, form and winter interest to a garden.

In the fall, some grasses turn colours such as bronze and burgundy, and they make a terrific contrast to other flowering plants.

Most grasses require very little water or maintenance.

After planting grasses in your garden and seeing them dance in the wind, you'll wonder why you waited so long to add them to your little bit of nature.

Easy-to-Grow Grasses for Eastern North America

Small to Medium-Sized Grasses

Sweetgrass
Hierochloa odorata



ILLUSTRATION BY ELLEN MELVILLE

Sweetgrass *Hierochloa odorata*

Native habitat:

Moist meadows, shores and bog margins.

Garden Conditions:

Grows in partial to full sun in wet to moist soil, sand or loam.

Form and Flower:

Flowers appear in the spring and are bell-shaped and arching. The attractive clusters are shiny tan, bronze or purple. The leaves become very fragrant when dried and are used by North American First Nations in religious ceremonies. Sweetgrass grows up to 60 cm (2 ft) in height and can spread vigorously by rhizomes.

Range: Circumboreal, south to New Jersey, west to Arizona.

Bottlebrush Grass *Elymus hystrix*
(syn. *Hystrix patula*)

Native habitat: Found in woods and open clearings.

Garden Conditions: Dappled light, moderate to full shade. Grows in dry to moist sandy loam soils with good drainage.

Form and Flower: Flower clusters are arranged perpendicular to the stem and resemble an actual bottlebrush. It grows naturally interspersed among other woodland plants. Flowers June to August. Grows 60 – 120 cm (2 – 4 ft).

Range: Nova Scotia and Quebec to North Dakota, south to Virginia and Oklahoma.

Little Bluestem *Schizachyrium scoparium*

Native habitat: Fields, prairies and open woods.

Garden Conditions: Full sun and dry soil. Will not tolerate competition. An important species of tallgrass and mixed grass prairies.

Form and Flower: The flowers line the branches and appear in late summer. Grows 20 – 80 cm (8 in – 2.5 ft) in height. In the fall the leaves turn red at the tips.

Range: New Brunswick to Alberta, south to Florida and Mexico.

Medium to Large-Sized Grasses

Canada Wild Rye *Elymus canadensis*

Native habitat: Moist to dry fields and meadows, dunes, bluffs and streambanks.

Garden Conditions: Wide range of conditions in full to partial sun, moist to dry soil, clay, loam or sand. Drought-tolerant. Good for covering a bare area while other prairie species become established.

Form and Flower: Blooms in late summer. The graceful arching seed heads turn sandy as they ripen and are very distinctive and decorative. Grows 1 – 1.5 m (3 – 5 ft).

Range: New Brunswick to Alaska, south to North Carolina, Texas and California.



ILLUSTRATION BY ELLEN MELVILLE

Big Bluestem *Andropogon gerardii*

Native habitat: Prairies, savannah and meadows.

Garden Conditions: Full sun to light shade. Dry to mesic soil (sand, loam or clay). Drought-tolerant. Attracts birds and butterflies. A major component of tallgrass prairies.

Form and Flower: Flowers are reddish-blue short spikes that resemble a turkey's foot, August to October. The seed heads ripen to a golden brown. Attractive bronze foliage in the fall. It grows in clumps to 75 – 150 cm (2.5 – 5 ft) in height.

Range: Quebec to Saskatchewan, south to Florida and Arizona.

Switchgrass *Panicum virgatum*

Native habitat: Prairie, open woods, marsh edge, coastal dunes, shores and brackish marshes.

Garden Conditions: Full sun. Dry to moist soils, sand and loam.

Form and Flower: Flowers are borne singly at the ends of branches in a very open form. Delicate-looking. Flowers are purple from August to October and the seed heads are tan to brown in colour. Grows in a clump 40 cm – 2 m (16 in – 6 ft) in height.

Range: Nova Scotia to Manitoba and Montana, south to Arizona and Mexico.

Indian Grass *Sorghastrum nutans*

Native habitat: Tallgrass prairie (moist or dry) and open woods.

Garden Conditions: Full sun to partial shade. Dry to mesic soil (sand, loam or clay), well-drained. A signature plant of tallgrass prairie ecosystems. Birds feed on the seeds.

Form and Flower: Flowers are small and bright yellow and appear in the late summer. The seed heads are golden brown, forming upright plumes in the fall. Grows 1 – 2.5 m (3 – 8 ft).

Range: Throughout North America.

Other Good Grasses

Canada Bluejoint *Calamagrostis canadensis* is a rapidly spreading, sod-forming grass that is useful for erosion control on wet sites. Grows 50 – 150 cm (20 in – 5 ft) in height. **Range:** Greenland to Alaska, south to North Carolina, Missouri and Arizona.

Poverty Oat Grass *Danthonia spicata* grows 10 – 60 cm (4 in – 2 ft) in infertile soils.

Range: Newfoundland to Florida, west to BC and south to Mexico

References

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