

Landscaping with Native Grasses

by Mark Majerus

from Kelsey, Summer 2005

Grasses can bring a simplistic style and texture to a landscape design. The wide variety of native grasses provide endless opportunities for adding color and providing a diversity of sizes and shapes, while offering lower water and nutrient input than the standard turf and ornamental grasses. There are commercially available native grasses that can be used for ground cover, manicured turf, individual accent/specimen plants, tall borders or backdrops, and for prairie or meadow restoration.

The present drought and related water shortages has increased the interest in alternatives to Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*) and other high maintenance landscaping plants. In exchange for plants with low moisture, low nutrient, and reduced maintenance requirements, some of the aesthetics, lushness, and softness may be sacrificed. Native drought tolerant grasses that were developed for coal strip-mine reclamation and highway roadside revegetation have been successfully used as turf or ground cover. Rhizomatous cool-season grasses such as 'Critana' thickspike wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*, origin Hill County, MT), 'Sodar' streambank wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*), and 'Rosana' western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*, origin Rosebud County, MT) have lower moisture and nutrient requirements and withstand trampling well, but do not cut cleanly and have a coarser texture than does Kentucky bluegrass. But for cover, site stabilization, and competition with weeds, they are hard to beat. Warm-season grasses are generally adapted to the plains and prairie region of eastern Montana, but have survived in the foothills and mountain valleys. 'Bad River' (NW South Dakota) and 'Birdseye' (Hot Springs County, WY) blue grama, and 'Bismarck', 'Tatanka' and 'Cody' buffalograss all have a very short stature, good drought tolerance, and require very little manicuring. However, they are late to

green up in the spring and early to brown up in the fall. The strong tillering of blue grama and the stolons of buffalograss allow these grasses to form a tight sod in relatively short order, but the resulting sod can eventually be contaminated with other more aggressive perennial grasses. Careful preparation can help prevent this invasion, but a mixed stand often occurs. Spring and early summer mowing, allowing the warm season grass to flower later in the summer, is one management option for these grasses.

Native grass stature can range in height from just a few inches to well over six-feet tall, offering a wide variety of options for backdrops, borders, screens and accent situations. Most accent/specimen grasses are bunchgrasses, planted in individual clumps and often maintained using weed barrier and bark/rock mulch. The six-foot plus stature of 'Trailhead' basin wildrye (*Leymus cinereus*, origin Musselshell County, MT) serves as an excellent ornamental backdrop, screen, border, or wildlife cover. Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) offers not only a moderately tall stature, but also an abundance of seed for game birds, as well as songbirds. One of the most attractive grasses is little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), having blue-green foliage in the summer, turning a vibrant burnt-red in the fall. Grasses that have attractive mature foliage and inflorescences include 'Rimrock' Indian ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*, origin Yellowstone County, MT), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), blue grama, and sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*). The silhouettes of grass inflorescences add a unique style and beauty to rock gardens and flowerbeds.

Seed is commercially available for many native grass species used for ground cover, turf, or prairie restoration. However mature, containerized plants are of limited supply in the nursery/landscaping industry (beware of plant materials originating from Winter Hardiness Zones other than Zones 3 to 5). See the *Source Guide for Native Plants of Montana* to find sources for native grass plants and seed (ordering information on page 4).

Native grasses offer a practical alternative to high maintenance turf and landscaping plants, providing a variety of texture, color, and intricacy with the added bonus of lower water, nutrient, and maintenance requirements. All this information is summarized in the publication *Creating Native Landscapes in the Northern Great Plains and Rocky Mountains*, a booklet describing xeriscaping principles using native plants.