

# GRASS IN THE GARDEN

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Ornamental grasses have been making a slow but steady comeback on the gardening scene in the past few years. I myself love grasses for their versatility, their low maintenance, their texture and their fall colour, to name a few. There are many, many horticultural varieties of grasses to choose from these days. The *Miscanthus* species is a group of tall grasses with beautiful texture and form that grows well in southern Ontario and the eastern United States. However, most *Miscanthus* and many other ornamental grasses do not grow well on the Canadian prairies. It's too cold. So what is a grass aficionado to do?

The answer is right in our own backyard. Southern Manitoba was once blanketed with prairie grasses. We had mixed grass prairie in western Manitoba and tall grass prairie in the Red River Valley and remnants of them still exist. This gives us lots of tough, prairie hardy grasses to choose from. We have Big Bluestem, Indian Grass, Switch Grass, Prairie Dropseed and Little Bluestem from the tall grass prairie. Side Oats Grama, Blue Grama, June Grass and Sheep Fescue come from the mixed grass prairie. But what do they look like? Are they ornamental? You bet they are. For this article I will focus on three of the tall grasses.

## DESCRIPTION

**Big Bluestem** *Andropogon gerardi* is an eye-catching grass that grows around 1.5 meters high (5 feet) in Manitoba. Occasionally it reaches 1.8 meters (6 feet). The lush green leaves of midsummer give way to distinctive three part seedheads with a purplish colour. These seedheads give it the nickname "Turkey Foot". The grand finale of the growing season occurs when the leaves turn a reddish-copper colour. Big Bluestem was the main grass of the tall grass prairie.

**Indian Grass** *Sorghastrum nutans* is another ornamental prairie grass that reaches 1.5 to 1.8 meters tall (5-6 feet). The seedheads are showy bronze plumes changing to golden brown as the seed ripens. The leaves also turn a bronzy colour in fall.

**Switch Grass** *Panicum virgatum* has a different form than the previous two species. The plant has a more rounded shape with masses of lacy, beige-pink seedheads, as opposed to the others which are more upright. It grows 1-1.3 meters tall (3-4 feet). The leaves turn a beautiful golden yellow in fall. This is the fastest growing grass of the group.

All three are warm season, clump grasses. They stay put in the garden and do not spread by invasive roots or aggressive seeding. Warm season grasses wait for the heat in late May and early June to start growing. Then they maintain their lush green foliage all through the summer, even during periods of prolonged heat or drought. Very, very deep roots come to their aid when it is dry. The roots extend far deeper below ground than the stems do above ground. The grasses reach their full height in late July or early August as the seedheads stretch up and reach for the sky. The seed ripens in early to mid September and the grasses don their autumn colours at the same time.

For an unusual, gopher's view of prairie grasses visit the "Root Jungle" display at the Living Prairie Museum in Winnipeg. The Museum also carries a delightful children's book called "Bobby Bluestem", that tells the story of Big Bluestem in the prairie.

## NATIVE HABITAT

Manitoba is the northern and western extent of the range of these grasses in Canada. In Manitoba the main range of each grass is the Red River Valley. However, Big Bluestem and

Switch Grass have been reported in scattered locations in other parts of the province too. Big Bluestem extends the farthest north, well into the Interlake north of Winnipeg and the furthest west into eastern Saskatchewan. This may be due to its tolerance to the widest range of growing conditions. Switch Grass is only occasional in the Interlake and at scattered locations extending west to the Manitoba- Saskatchewan border. Indian Grass has the smallest range with no reports outside the Red River Valley. Its northern limit is a little bit north of Winnipeg.

All of them are dominant grasses in the vast tall grass prairie of the midwest United States.

## **CULTURE**

These grasses are all easy to establish. They prefer full sun and medium to moist soil. Big Bluestem and Switch Grass will tolerate a wider range of soil types and moisture. They can grow well under both wetter and drier conditions than Indian Grass. They all thrive in the heavy clay soils of the Red River Valley.

They can be established either by direct seeding outdoors in May for larger areas or by setting out plants in spring after the danger of frost is past or in summer. I find that when seedling plugs or pots are planted in spring Switch Grass is almost full grown at the end of the second year. Indian Grass and Big Bluestem take another year or two to attain full size. Seeding takes a few years longer to establish the plants so more patience is required.

If you wish to start the plants indoors from seed, they can be germinated in late March for transplanting into the garden in June. They should be stratified (a cool, moist treatment) for six weeks before germination. I find it easiest to seed the trays, water, and then put in a coldroom or fridge to stratify. They germinate well in 5-10 days with bottom heat at 21-23 degrees. Bottom heat can be provided by heating cables or by setting above a hot air register until germination begins.

Big Bluestem, Indian Grass, and Switchgrass are all great to cut for fresh or dry arrangements. Many songbirds love to see them in a garden too because the seeds are a favourite food source for them. All three of these grasses make handsome specimen plants in the garden. Groups of them can also be placed in flower beds where they provide interesting texture and form as well as being a neutral green buffer between blooming perennials. In autumn their showy seedstalks and colourful leaves provide interest in the flowerbed when most flowers are finished blooming. Of course, they can also be mixed with other grasses and wildflowers to create a tall prairie meadow. One suggested combination of plants is as follows: Heartleaf Alexander, Northern Bedstraw, Black Eyed Susan, Purple Prairie Clover, Meadow Blazing Star, Stiff Goldenrod, Smooth Aster and Awned Wheatgrass. This gives a succession of bloom from spring until fall.

Gardens are wonderful places. We can get to know our prairie heritage in them. We can enjoy the beauty of flowing, blowing, carefree grasses. We can provide habitat and food for creatures of the wild. We can do all this by planting our very own, native grasses in our gardens.

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. [www.prairieoriginals.com](http://www.prairieoriginals.com)