

NORTHERN BEDSTRAW

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

INTRODUCTION

Take a walk through a prairie in June and you are likely to come across a sweet smelling little plant with billowy clouds of white flowers. This is Northern Bedstraw, a plant with an interesting history. It has had a variety of uses over the years. Large quantities of its fine roots were gathered by Great Plains Indian tribes because they were one of the few sources of true red dye on the prairies. Bedstraw is in the same family as the tropical coffee plant. The roasted seeds are one of the best coffee substitutes in the north. Bedstraw juice has been used as a wash for skin problems such as rashes, cuts, insect bites, sunburn, and excema. Bedstraw tea made from leaves and roots was also used to relieve diarrhea and internal bleeding. Continued use however, can irritate the mouth and tongue.

A close relative of Northern Bedstraw is Sweet Scented Bedstraw. It contains compounds that smell strongly of vanilla. The fresh leaves are not very fragrant, however, they are sweet scented when dried. Because of this, both Sweet Scented and Northern Bedstraw were often mixed with bedding straw in mattresses and pillows to give fresh fragrance. Sweet Scented Bedstraw was also gathered by Blackfoot women for use as perfume.

DESCRIPTION

Northern Bedstraw *Galium boreale* grows as a tall groundcover 20–50 cm tall (8”-20”). The small, linear leaves are arranged in whorls of four around slender, square stems. It is an erect perennial arising from fine, orange/brown, spreading roots. The showy, white clusters of sweet smelling flowers brighten up the garden in June and last for about 3 weeks.

Sweet Scented Bedstraw *Galium triflorum* grows 15-20 cm tall (6”-8”). The leaves, a narrow oval shape with pointed tip, are arranged in whorls of six. The plant does not spread by the roots, however, the stems trail along the ground for a distance of 30-100 cm (1-3 ft.). This makes it an excellent groundcover for shady conditions and moist soil. The inconspicuous flowers are very small and greenish white so Sweet Scented Bedstraw is grown as a foliage plant.

NATIVE HABITAT

Northern Bedstraw is quite common all across the Prairie Provinces. I have seen it in many places in Manitoba. It grows on open prairies with medium to moist soil and also at edges of aspen and poplar groves and in open woods. It is not common in very dry locations. It is native from Quebec to Alaska.

Sweet Scented Bedstraw is common in the boreal forest. It can be found in moist places and damp woodlands across the prairie provinces. Its range extends from Newfoundland to Alaska and south through much of the U.S.A.

CULTURE

Northern Bedstraw prefers medium to moist soil in full sun or part shade. In the garden it can play several roles. In flowerbeds it can serve as a groundcover between other larger perennials such as Joe Pye, New England Aster, or Culver's Root. It can also be mixed with wildflowers and prairie grasses to create a low maintenance, prairie meadow. Northern Bedstraw combines well with other prairie plants such as Heartleaf Alexander, Black Eyed Susan, Philadelphia Fleabane, Wild Bergamot, Pink Onion, Smooth Aster, June Grass, Little Bluestem, and Prairie Dropseed. In tall grass prairie it is one of the few spring blooming wildflowers. Since this plants spreads by the roots, it is not recommended for planting near very small perennials or in rockgardens.

Sweet Scented Bedstraw loves shady, moist conditions so it is better planted in a shady, woodland garden, where it will thrive.

Both of these Bedstraws can be established in the garden by setting out plants in the spring after the danger of frost is passed or in summer. They are also easy to grow from seed. Stratify the seed (a cool, moist treatment) for six weeks before germination. I find it easiest to seed the trays and put them in a coldroom. to stratify. Northern Bedstraw germinates well in 6-10 days with bottom heat around 21degrees C. Sweet Scented Bedstraw takes 10-15 days at 23degrees C. Bottom heat can be provided by heating cables or mats or by setting the tray just above a hot air register until germination begins. These grow at a good rate so plants germinated in mid March will be ready to plant outside in June. Northern Bedstraw is a little slow to establish but it becomes quite thick after a few years.

Today Bedstraws are still found in the wild and are increasingly found in flowerbeds and cultivated gardens. The dainty, white flowers of Northern Bedstraw adorn our gardens in June and form a resilient and carefree groundcover. And Sweet Scented Bedstraw provides groundcover and fine textured foliage for shady spaces.

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. www.prairieoriginals.com