



Little Bluestem Provides Big Rewards

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Late summer through fall gives ornamental and native grasses the chance to strut their stuff. Stems elongate topped by all manner of seedheads – long and fluffy, wispy curls, strong and stout. One native grass of particular note is little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) named the 2022 grass of the year by the Perennial Plant Association.

Little bluestem is a native, warm season clumping grass found in 48 states and hardy from zones 3 to 10. Unlike our cool season blue grasses and fescues, little bluestem begins its growth spurt later in spring when temperatures begin to climb. New shoots are bluish in color, hence the name. Plants typically grow vigorously from June through September in the Northeast.

Clumps are generally upright reaching about 2 to 4 feet in height depending on the cultivar. This grass is fine textured with foliage ranging from green to blue. Come fall and stems produce 3 inch long, fluffy inflorescences (flowers) in colors ranging from white to bluish to silvery gold. They look most striking backdropped by the rising or setting sun, glowing like feathers touched by sunbeams. This creates quite the spectacle when planted en masse and rippling in the breeze. Foliage turns purplish, pinkish, reddish or coppery depending on the cultivar as autumn envelops the landscape.



Little bluestem. Photo by dmp2010

Little bluestem is an easy care perennial grass whether placed in ornamental garden beds or in pollinator gardens. Like many prairie grasses, its root system is extensive allowing it to be grown on poor or infertile sites. In its native habitat, little bluestem is content with upland dryland sites or even along ridges where it thrives while at the same time offering erosion control.

This grass is naturally found in a wide range of habitats, from moist to very dry. While it is quite adaptable, little bluestem requires a sunny site for best growth. New plantings would need to be watered but once established, this grass likes to be left alone. Fertile soils or too much water encourage taller growth that will be prone to flop late in the season. This can sometimes be problematic when grown in perennial beds that are irrigated. Pair little bluestem with other moderately drought tolerant perennials such as cone flowers, goldenrod, sedums, yarrows and rudbeckias. Play up its rosy fall color with pink mums, asters or colchicums.

Post planting care is a breeze. Simply cut back plants in late winter or early spring. Little bluestem can also be used in containers. Some popular cultivars include 'The Blues', 'Prairie Blue', 'Blaze' and 'Itasca'. Plants can also be started from seed or propagated by dividing clumps.

One of the best reasons to grow this attractive plant is that it serves as a source of food and habitat for birds, small mammals and even some insects. A stand of little bluegrass can serve as a nesting area for several species of birds including meadowlarks. Seed are devoured by small mammals and upland game birds. Several species of finches, sparrows as well as juncos also feed on the seeds.

Consider adding little bluestem to pollinator gardens. It can serve as a larval host plant for various moths and butterflies all the while providing habitat for other wildlife.

Not only does little bluestem offer year round interest in the landscape but it is drought tolerant, low maintenance, suitable for a wide range of sites, able to grow well in poor soils and hot, dry conditions, relatively pest free and wildlife friendly. While it doesn't have vibrant flowers, it's fluffy white seed heads are quite attractive.

If you have questions about growing little bluestem or on other gardening topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.