

## Big Bluestem

### *Andropogon gerardii*

Predominant prairie grass, becoming quite tall midsummer. Often called “turkey foot” because of the characteristic 3-branched seed head.



Illustration: Elsie H. Froeschner



Image: minnesotawildflowers.info

Image: Anna Gardner, ISU

**Key characteristic(s):** 3-branched seed head. Foliage may turn a blue/purple color, especially in the fall. Hairy ligule<sup>1</sup>.

## Indiangrass

### *Sorghastrum nutans*

The other, predominant tall prairie grass. Flowers from late July - September. Generally is a lighter green and has a wider leaf angle than big bluestem.

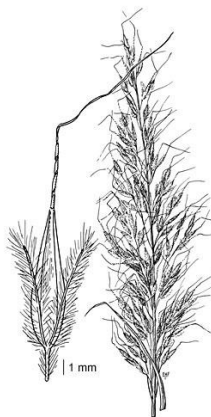


Illustration: Elsie H. Froeschner



Image: soilcropandmore.info



Image: Anna Gardner, ISU



Image: Missouri Wildflowers Nursery

**Key characteristic(s):** Silky, almost greasy seed heads. Stiff ligule<sup>1</sup> (shown above).

## Little bluestem

### *Schizachyrium scoparium*

Predominant short grass of the prairie, especially in drier areas. Reaches 1 – 3ft in height. A bunchgrass, often found growing in clumps. Seed heads are fluffy and white when mature. Frequently used in landscaping.



Illustration: Elsie H. Froeschner



Image: Anna Gardner, ISU



Image: Prairie Moon Nursery



Image: Prairie Moon Nursery

**Key characteristic(s):** Folded emergent leaf. Flat tiller<sup>2</sup>. Often a blue-ish color early in the season, changing to a red-ish color by the fall.

## Switchgrass

### *Panicum virgatum*

Tall prairie grass, preferring low, moist areas. Seed head is pyramidal in shape when fully open, roughly ½ as wide as it is tall. Leaf stems nodes<sup>3</sup> are often purple in color. Can occur in very dense stands.



Illustration: Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation



Image: illinoiswildflowers.info

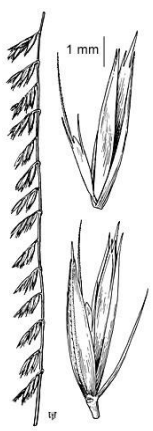


Image: UMASS extension



Image: prairienursery.com

**Key characteristic(s):** Ligule<sup>1</sup> is a distinct tuft of hairs with the hairs continuing in a v-shape up the leaf (shown above).



## Side oats gramma grass *Bouteloua curtipendula*

Shorter grass, reaching a height of 3ft and preferring drier areas. Ligule<sup>1</sup> is a row of short hairs. Distinct seed head: 4 to 12-inch-long with singular row of flowers/oat-like fruits drooping from one side (shown to the right).



Image: Prairie Moon Nursery



Images: minnesotawildflowers.info



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**Key characteristic(s):** Stiff hairs emerging from swollen bulbs on leaf margins (shown above). Red anthers<sup>4</sup> when flowering.

## Prairie dropseed *Sporobolus heterolepis*



Illustration: Elsie H. Froeschner



Image: Anna Gardner, ISU

A shorter species, usually less than 3ft tall. A bunch grass, growing in clumps. Seed heads pyramidal, but less wide and more dense than switchgrass. Tiny, round seeds easily shatter from the seed head when ripe, hence the name. Seed heads known for their distinctive, coriander-like, smell.



Image: minnesotawildflowers.info



Image: Missouri Botanical Garden

**Key characteristic(s):** Long leaves (8-20in) with thin, wispy tips that often dry and curl inward.

## Canada wild rye *Elymus canadensis*

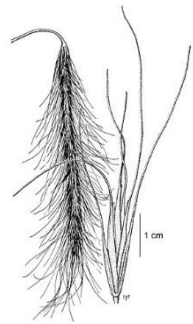


Illustration: Elsie H. Froeschner

Cool-season grass, flowering earlier (July – August) than other warm-season species. Plant often has a blue-ish color and grows to 2-5ft in height. Seed heads can be up to 10 inches long and arch downwards, especially as the seeds mature. Awns (bristles) curve outward from seed heads.



Image: Prairie Moon Nursery



Image: illinoiswildflowers.info

**Key characteristic(s):** Pronounced auricles<sup>5</sup> that clasp the stem at the ligule<sup>1</sup>. Nodding seed head.

## Virginia wild rye *Elymus virginicus*

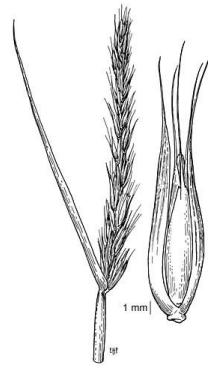


Illustration: Elsie H. Froeschner

Similar to its Canadian sister, but prefers wetter conditions and can tolerate shade. Common in wooded areas. Often shorter than Canada wild rye, reaching heights of 3ft. Seed heads stay upright and are shorter than Canada wild rye. Seed heads may also stay partially enclosed inside uppermost leaf.



Image: Anna Gardner, ISU

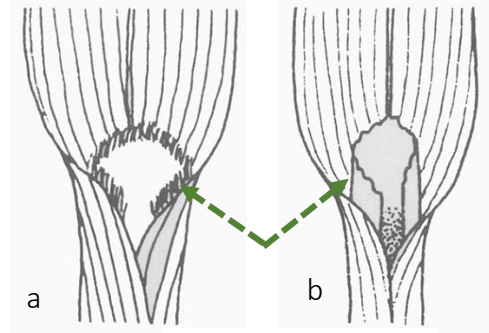


Image: Prairie Moon Nursery

**Key characteristic(s):** Upright seed head. Plants often take on a red-purple color by the time flowering occurs in mid/late summer.

# Grass glossary

1. Ligule – The inner area when the leaf blade meets the sheath (where the leaf wraps around the stem). Usually hairy (Figure 1a) or membranous (Figure 1b) in nature. Easiest to spot when a leaf blade is pulled back slightly from the main stem (Figure 2). While seemingly inconsequential, many grasses can be identified through their ligule or the surrounding area of the leaves.



Images: agron.iastate.edu

Figure 1. Drawings of a hairy (a) and membranous (b) ligule.

2. Tiller – A new shoot originating from the base of the plant (Figure 3).

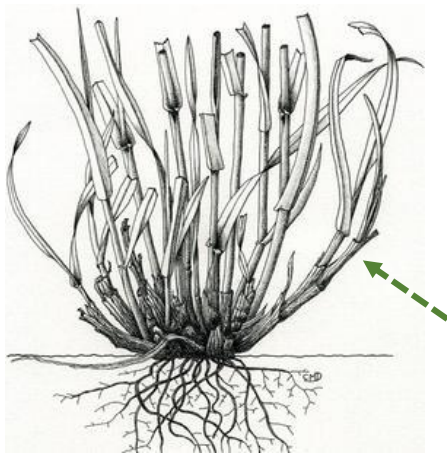


Image: ipm.ucanr.edu

Figure 3. Drawing of a bunch grass with many tillers (shoots).



Image: illinoiswildflowers.info

Figure 4. Grass nodes (highlighted in boxes) along the stem.

3. Leaf node – An joint on the grass stem where the leaves or branch originate. Oftentimes swollen or slightly pronounced in shape (Figure 4).

4. Anther – The pollen-filled sacks of a flower. When grasses are blooming anthers can often be seen hanging off the seed head (Figure 5).

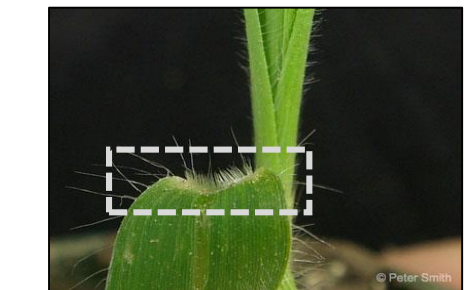


Image: omafra.gov.on.ca

Figure 2. View of a hairy ligule (highlighted in the box) from the back.



Image: ohioplants.org

Figure 5. Indiangrass in bloom. The anthers are the yellow structures hanging off the flowers (highlighted in box).

5. Auricle – Small, claw-like formations that clasp the area where the leaf blade meets the sheath (Figure 6a & b).

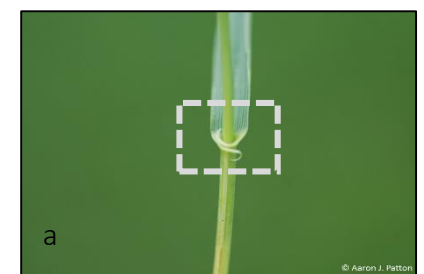


Image: purdueturftips.blogspot.com

Figure 6. Photograph (a) and drawing (b) of auricles clasp the leaf sheath.

Image: agron.iastate.edu