

# Some Native Grasses Are A Great Addition To Gardens

BY BETH BOTTS  
© 2015, Chicago Tribune

Grasses are glorious as summer ripens into fall, with their leaves and stalks turned to gold, copper or red and their banners of seeds fluttering in the wind. Many of the best ornamental grasses are Midwestern natives, the backbone of the prairie. But given the limited space and well-groomed aesthetic of most city and suburban yards, it can be hard for wild-hearted native grasses to fit in. Some species top 7 feet and can flop untidily when they're growing all alone, without the support of a few thousand other plants in a prairie. Fortunately, an increasing number of selections of native species are now available, some shorter, some more colorful, some more tidy. "These aren't hybrids," says Mary Meyer, a professor and extension horticulturist for the University of Minnesota who runs grass trials at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. "They're variations that have come about naturally, and have been selected because they are particularly attractive."

Because the selected cultivars offer a range of sizes and more predictable performance, she says, they can encourage gardeners to plant native grasses in gardens. Straight species of more native grasses are becoming available, too, giving gardeners more choices.

Most grasses need full sun, and most Midwestern species require very well-drained soil, says Shannon Currey, marketing director for Hoffman Nursery, a wholesale grower in North Carolina that specializes in ornamental grasses. Most are warm-season grasses, meaning they will be slower to start growing in spring than the cool-season grass species in your lawn.

Once they're established, prairie grasses prefer to live on rainfall, so they aren't good companions for perennials that you will be watering. Instead, find them a sunny spot among drought-tolerant natives such as black-eyed Susan, butterfly weed and goldenrod or other tough perennials such as Russian sage.

For shadier spots, consider native sedges — shorter plants that aren't technically grasses, but have a similar texture. Since they usually come from wetlands or woodlands, they often can be happy with more moisture or less light.

Here are some native grasses and sedges, including good cultivars, to consider. They're good for large pots, too: "Grasses do really well in containers as long as they have good drainage," Currey says.

## GRASSES

**Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*):** This extremely drought-tolerant grass, 3 to 3 1/2 feet tall with fine foliage that tints many roadsides purple-blue in late summer, is becoming ever more popular in gardens. Carousel, a selection from the Chicago Land Grows Plant Introduction Program, is especially compact



PHOTO: HOFFMAN NURSERY/TNS  
**Consider ornamental grasses for large pots: Grasses do really well in containers as I., says Shannon Currey of Hoffman Nursery.**

and upright, reaching 2 1/2 feet tall. Blue Heaven (*Schizachyrium scoparium* Minn-BlueA), introduced by the University of Minnesota, is a little taller (3 feet) and has especially rich burgundy fall color. Meyer says. Other cultivars include The Blues and Prairie Blues, which have good fall color but are somewhat inclined to flop.

**Switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*):** "Switch grasses are real workhorses," Currey says — adaptable to a wide range of soil, pH and moisture. The species and selections vary from 3 to 7 feet high, with seed heads that turn reddish before they turn gold. Tall and assertive, switch grasses can create structure in the garden, Currey adds. Northwind is a top cultivar, particularly narrow and upright and growing to about 4 feet tall (seed heads will add about another foot to this and all switch grasses listed here). Northwind, introduced by Roy Diblik at Northwind Perennial Farm in Burlington, Wis., was the Perennial Plant Association's 2014 Plant of the Year. Heavy Metal is also relatively upright, growing to 4 feet with foliage that is silvery blue-green. Shenandoah is 3 feet tall and has a striking burgundy fall color that turns relatively early. Cape Breeze, a newer, more compact selection growing 2 to 2 1/2 feet tall, has a looser, fluffier habit, Currey says. Ruby Ribbons and Hot Rod have good red fall color, Meyer says, and are relatively short, just 3 feet or so.

**Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*):** Even the straight species of prairie dropseed can find a place in many gardens, growing only 24 to 36 inches high and wide with a mound of

fine-textured foliage that turns golden-orange in fall. The flowers are held high above the foliage on slender stems and ripen into a see-through cloud of delicate seeds. Tara, another selection from Diblik, is a dwarf cultivar, with a mound of foliage just a foot high. "It's a cute plant," says Currey. "It's a little more upright. It's perky." Try it among sun-loving perennials, she suggests, or even as a ground cover in a place where it won't get walked on. Be aware, though, that prairie dropseed may take three years or so to reach its full size. "It calls for patience," Currey says.

**Tufted hairgrass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*):** This is one of the few grasses that can handle part shade. It's also a cool-season grass, growing most vigorously in spring and fall. The tuft of foliage may grow only 16 to 18 inches high and wide, but the airy seed heads grow on stalks that may reach 4 feet. "It's great for filling in between larger perennials," Currey says.

**Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*):** Neil Diboll of Prairie Nursery in Westfield, Wis., recommends this relatively short grass, notable for its distinctive seed heads, which grow up the side of 3-foot stalks. The foliage grows in a dense clump 12 to 18 inches tall, and turns golden brown in autumn.

## SEDGES

**Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*):** Yes, it's an Illinois native, despite the name. This sedge, about 1 to 1 foot tall, appears very grasslike, with a mound of silky, fine leaves that are a lovely contrast to broad-leaved shade plants such as hostas, Siberian bugloss and wild ginger. It needs part to full shade, Currey says, and can often tolerate even the dry shade under trees. If it's in the right site, it will spread slowly, but Meyer warns that it will need to be weeded regularly since it's not aggressive enough to outcompete non-native plants.

**Palm sedge (*Carex muskingumensis*):** This sedge, which does well in full sun to part shade, grows 30 to 36 inches tall with upright tufts of airy leaves that can give it a whimsical look. "It's very tough," Meyer says, and can tolerate wet to dry soils. It has a large, dense root system, which makes it a great candidate for a rain garden (a garden designed for and able to handle ample rainfall and/or stormwater runoff in its design and plant selection). It may self-seed. Try it in a container for a tropical look from an Illinois plant.

**Fox sedge (*Carex vulpinoidea*):** Diboll recommends this wetland sedge for rain gardens. Growing 1 foot to 3 feet tall, it has an attractive mound of fine-textured arching foliage that starts the season green and turns bronze to brown. Fox sedge needs full sun but moist to wet soil, making it a good companion for perennials that will be watered regularly.

with the pinks and purples of Agastache, Cone flowers, Foxtail Clover, Spirea, Red Yarrow, Cherry Tart Sumac, Beardtongue, Lavender and Catmint, all set off nicely with contrasting yellow colors brought in by Ozark Sundrops, Threadleaf Coreopsis and Day lilies.

The driveway invites, with varietal annuals and large pots of King Tut Papyrus and Coreopsis, small wooden wheelbarrow overflows with color. Right front of the house features white rose bushes, low growing shrubs and trees. You'll enjoy the visit.

## WSC Hosts Wildflower Walk Sept. 23

WAYNE, Neb. — Wayne State College will host "Nebraska Wildflower Week" on campus, Sept. 23 at 6:30 p.m. There is no admission charge.

Take a leisurely stroll through the Ecology Study Area and Prairie on the Wayne State College campus and learn about native plants. The stroll will be lead by Dr. Mark Hammer, Professor at Wayne State College. Meet at the McCorkindale School House on East 14th Street. Parking is available in the Campus Services Parking Lot, north of the hospital. Native plants will be available to take home after the program.

There will be drawings for native plants at the event. The event was sponsored by the Campus Beautification Committee and the Wayne State College Arboretum. Hammer of Wayne State College Department of Life Sciences completed his bachelor's degree at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa; master's degree at Clemson University, Clemson, S.C.; and doctorate degree at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Ark. His teaching interests include environmental concerns, biology concepts, botany, ecology, biology and society, conservation biology and the nature and culture of the Great Plains. Among his professional activities and awards, Hammer has earned a Nebraska Environmental Trust grant for Educational Wetland Establishment and a Nebraska State Wildlife grant for Tall Prairie Restoration at Thompson-Barnes Wildlife Management Area.

For more information, contact at 402-375-7384 or [kischral@wsc.edu](mailto:kischral@wsc.edu).

## Webinar For Garden Educators Sept. 24

BROOKINGS — Putting Your School Garden to Bed for the Winter is the topic of the next garden-based education webinar presented by SDSU Extension. The program is scheduled for Sept. 24 from 9:30-10 a.m. CDT and repeated from 3:30-4 p.m. CDT.

"School teachers, afterschool and garden program leaders and helpers are all encouraged to participate," said Chris Zdorovtsov, SDSU Extension Community Development Field Specialist.

This is the fourth season of SDSU Extension's webinar programs targeting teaching garden educators. The program, presented by Zdorovtsov and will discuss fall garden clean-up and classroom learning activities that keep gardening active in the winter months.

To participate in the Webinar, visit [www.iGrow.org/](http://www.iGrow.org/) events and click the link within the event posting. Participants are encouraged to log in within 15 minutes of the specified time, especially when participating for the first time, to allow for computer set-up.

If you would like to receive more information on trainings and grant opportunities related to youth gardening programs or to exchanging questions and ideas with others involved in similar projects, e-mail Zdorovtsov at Christina.Zdorovtsov@sdstate.edu to be added to the SDSU Youth Gardening LISTSERV.

## Donations For School Gardens Sought

BROOKINGS — SDSU Extension seeks seed donations to assist school and other teaching gardens. Twenty-nine school and youth garden programs across the state each received 20 seed packets from this effort in 2015.

The donated seeds are intended only for newly starting and established gardens that offer an educational program.

Eligible projects include gardens for schools, learning centers, daycares, 4-H clubs or other non-profit groups in South Dakota, where the produce will be used as part of the program or freely shared with those of need. Qualified projects must include an educational component.

Unopened seed packets with varieties that are appropriate to South Dakota are requested. Vegetable seeds are highest priority, but flower seeds will also be accepted. Certified seed potatoes and onion sets or transplants would also be welcomed in the spring.

Ideally, seeds would have been stored in cool, dark conditions where they were not exposed to moisture or temperature extremes or are purchased new for the 2016 growing season. Please consider the age of the seeds when donating. Older seeds have reduced germination rates so only donate seeds packaged for 2015 or 2016.

Consider donating to educational garden programs across the state. Deliver or mail seed donations to SDSU Extension Regional Center in Sioux Falls, 2001 E. 8th St., Sioux Falls, SD 57103. Attn: Chris Zdorovtsov.

Applications for donated seed open January 2016.

If you are interested in receiving donated seeds, call the SDSU Extension Regional Center in Sioux Falls in January for an application. An application notice will also be sent on the SDSU Youth Gardening LISTSERV in January.

To join the LISTSERV or for additional information on this project, please contact Chris Zdorovtsov, SDSU Extension Community Development Field Specialist, at 605-782-3290 or at [Christina.Zdorovtsov@sdstate.edu](mailto:Christina.Zdorovtsov@sdstate.edu).

## SDSU Extension

# What Is This Fruit ... And Is It Edible?

BY RHODA BURROWS  
SDSU Extension Horticulture Specialist

In mid- to late-summer, we often receive questions on how to identify fruit and whether or not a particular fruit is edible. To identify a fruit, it is helpful to know both plant and fruit characteristics: Woody or herbaceous plant? Vining or upright?

Do the leaves attach to the stem opposite each other (i.e., paired), or do they alternate from one side of the stem to the other? What size and color are the fruit? Is each fruit's stem attached directly to the twig, or are they in a cluster that attaches to the twig? And, one question I find often helpful in distinguishing among smaller fruits, does it have a single pit, or are there several seed in each fruit?

Shrubs or trees in the Dakotas bearing fruit with a single seed or "pit" include various kinds of cherries, chokecherries, plums, apricots, viburnum, buffaloberries and dogwood. Most of these have alternate leaves; however, viburnums, buffaloberry and most dogwoods have opposite leaves.

Fruits with several seeds include aronia, buckthorn, elderberries, pears, apples, juneberries, mountain-ash, hawthorn, grapes, honeysuckles and snowberry. These all have alternate leaves, except for honeysuckles and snowberry,

which have leaves arranged in pairs (opposite each other on the stem), and buckthorn, which usually has leaves just slightly offset from opposite. Mountain-ash and Elderberry both have compound (multiple leaflets) leaves; the leaflets are opposite each other, but the compound leaves are arranged in an alternate pattern on the twig on Mountain-ash and in an opposite pattern on elderberries. (One can distinguish a leaflet from a leaf by looking for the new bud forming between the leaf petiole and the branch; the base of leaflets have no such buds.)

Once you know whether the fruit has one or several seeds, the basic plant structure (tree, shrub, or vine), and the leaf arrangement (alternate or opposite) you should have the information needed to identify most of the different fruits you will find growing in South Dakota.

For example, how do you distinguish chokecherry or

aronia from buckthorn?

## BUCKTHORN CAN MAKE YOU SICK

This is an important distinction, because the fruit looks somewhat similar, and buckthorn berries can make you quite sick!

If you have only the fruit to examine, look for how many seed there are in the fruit (always check several berries): buckthorn and aronia usually have multiple seeds per berry, whereas chokecherries will have one.

To distinguish between aronia and buckthorn, you may need to examine the plant. Look at the leaf arrangement — aronia leaves are always in alternate arrangement (never paired), whereas buckthorn leaves are essentially opposite. The arrangement of the fruit on the stem is also an important distinction - each buckthorn berry attaches directly to the branch, while aronia (and chokecherries) are borne in clusters of fruit,

with each cluster having a single attachment to the branch.

Sand cherries (*Prunus pumila* or *P. besseyi*) are another edible fruiting shrub that might be confused with buckthorn, due to the dark fruit color and arrangement.

As with chokecherries, the single pit in the fruit, and alternate leaf arrangement of the *Prunus* species distinguishes them from the buckthorn.

Black currant fruit can also resemble buckthorn fruit, and they both have multiple seed. However, currant leaves are very distinctive, with three lobes similar to a maple leaf in shape; they are rough to the touch and are arranged alternately on the stem. Currant fruit are also in clusters, not attached directly to the stem. All currants are edible, although some, such as the alpine

currant, are noted as being "insipid" (bland flavor).

Several other ornamental shrub plants bear fruit that look appealing, but are probably best left to the birds. Some viburnum have edible fruit, but many are mildly poisonous, so those are best left to the experts.

Viburnum have opposite leaves, with fruit in clusters arranged with each attaching to the cluster stem at a single point; each berry has a single seed. The fruit clusters may resemble Elderberry fruit clusters, but elderberries have compound leaves.

With the exception of haskaps or honeyberries (discussed earlier this year), Honeysuckle bushes and vines (*Lonicera* spp.) do not have edible fruit. Honeysuckles, whether vine or shrub types, all have opposite leaves and hollow stems; most of them have red ber-

ries that are set in pairs, and contain multiple seeds per berry.

Mountain ash has orangish-red fruit, with compound leaves and several seed. Birds appreciate the fruit, but to be (somewhat) edible for humans it must be cooked, after which it may be made into jelly or even wine.

If in doubt about the edibility of a fruit, always check with an expert. It will be helpful to them if you note the leaf arrangement on the plant, and either send a fruit cluster, or send a photo with fruit cut open or the number of seeds noted. It is often helpful also if you take a photo of a branch showing several leaves.

*Rhoda Burrows is a professor and SDSU Extension Horticulture Specialist*

**Johnson Electric, LLP**

*Rural • Residential • Commercial*

Electrical • Telephone • Overhead Wiring • Trenching  
Bucket Truck Reaches 80' • Digger Truck

**"Fast Courteous Service"**

**500 W. 12TH ST., YANKTON**

**605-665-5686**

Rick Merkel • Ben Merkel  
Chris Merkel

**Save up to \$2600**  
on a qualifying  
**Home Comfort System**  
with utility & manufacturing rebates  
Financing Available

**HEATING & COOLING**

Call Larry or Jamie  
for complete details

920 Broadway, Yankton • 605-665-9461 • 1-800-491-9461 • [www.larrysheatngandcooling.com](http://www.larrysheatngandcooling.com)