

# Native Prairie Grasses for the Illinois Landscape



Nothing beats the light and airy look of tall, distinctive grasses in a landscape arrangement. The fluffy seedheads and slender, attractive stems practically dance in the wind on breezy days, adding texture as well as a structural element to any landscape bed. For many years, there was a trend toward non-native grasses. However, there is a growing interest in native prairie grasses, given their inherent adaptability to our local climate and their ecological value.

## Big bluestem

*Andropogon gerardii*

Big bluestem has wonderful height, sometimes reaching up to 8 feet tall including the seedheads. It's known for attractive, blue-green foliage and stems that fade to reddish-bronze in fall. Interesting seed heads develop late in the growing season and persist into winter.

**In the landscape:** Big bluestem fits well in the rear of a border planting or as a backdrop for other, shorter natives. It also works nicely in mass plantings or as a visual screen when planted in groups. It can be maintained as somewhat of a specimen when mixed into native plantings, although it does tend to slowly spread by rhizomes over time. Spread can be limited by other competing prairie plants or by periodic removal of spreading shoots.



Big bluestem is a native grass known for its height and year-round interest. Its blue-green foliage and stems fade to a reddish-bronze in the fall at which time it develops interesting seedheads.



Little bluestem is a native prairie grass with beauty in all four seasons, including excellent fall color pictured here.



These young prairie dropseed plants will mature into a border of thin, feathery vegetation along the sidewalk edge.





Switchgrass' height makes it appealing as an ornamental plant that works well in a variety of soil conditions. Late in the growing season, its seedheads mature and expand creating an airy cloud-like effect.

## Switchgrass

*Panicum virgatum*

Switchgrass is another very tall native grass used for both its ornamental appeal and its tough adaptability to a wide range of soil conditions. While switchgrass can have nice fall color, its seedheads provide the most interest. As seedheads mature and expand late in the growing season, they create a cloud-like effect with their open and airy form.

**In the landscape:** One issue with switchgrass is its innate ability to spread, either from rhizomes or by seed. For this reason, it's probably better used in mass plantings or as a solid border to create visual screening. It works well in problem areas such as wet spots, areas with erosion or locations with some partial shade.

## Little bluestem

*Schizachyrium scoparium*

Little bluestem packs a ton of beauty into shorter stems and fluffier seedheads. Foliage and stems emerge with a deep blue-green color that matures to lighter green with reddish accents at stem nodes. In late summer, flowers appear as beautiful purplish-red structures that mature into fluffy tufts. Perhaps the plant's greatest beauty lies in its wonderful fall color creating a spectacular reddish-purple color.

**In the landscape:** Little bluestem works well as a more vertical component that is not overly tall at only 2 to 4 feet by the season's end. It works well in a great variety of garden uses, from mass plantings to small pollinator pockets.

## Prairie dropseed

*Sporobolus heterolepis*

Another smaller native grass that works well in the landscape is prairie dropseed. While it does have interesting seed heads and nice fall color, this plant has the most value in its fine-textured foliage during the growing season and much smaller size at around 2 feet in height.

**In the landscape:** This plant works well along a sidewalk or at the front edge of a native garden. It creates a welcoming and inviting view with its fine-textured, hair-like foliage. It is a highly underused landscape plant that deserves more attention given its overall low maintenance requirements and well-behaved habit.

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