



GRASSES

Native to Tallgrass Prairie

SWITCHGRASS

(*Panicum virgatum*)

Description

During the fall, many of the native grasses become indistinguishable at a distance, but among the grasses several loose clumps with an orange tint may be seen. This orange-tinted plant is likely to be switchgrass. The generic name, *Panicum*, comes from the word "panic," meaning "millet." The species name, *virgatum*, comes from the Latin word *virg*, meaning "wand-like," such as a magician's wand.

The stem of this grass is often purplish to reddish in color, and turns an orange tint when it matures, growing 1 to 6 feet (0.5-2 m) tall. Its leaves are flat and rough, reaching 4 to 25 inches (10-60 cm) in length, with a triangular patch of hairs at the base and a hairy *ligule*. The seed head is very open, with branches projecting outward. This species is a sod-

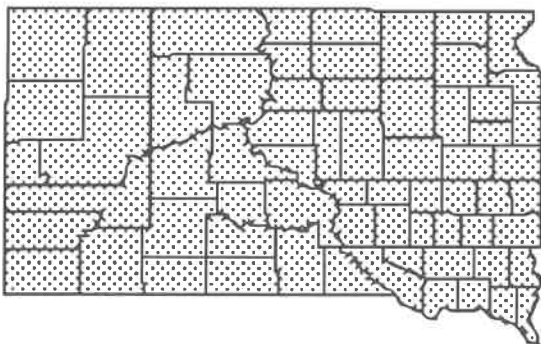


forming grass and produces scaly *rhizomes*. New plants arise from buds at the base of the plant and from the *rhizomes*.

Distribution

Switchgrass is native to the tallgrass prairie of North America. It is a dominant species of the tallgrass prairie throughout the Great Plains. Switchgrass can be found in the provinces of Southern Manitoba to Eastern Saskatchewan of Canada and in all states except five in the far West and Northwest United States.

In South Dakota, switchgrass is located mostly in the eastern part of the state, but also grows along drainages and ravine bottoms in the west.



Species Distribution

Natural History

Switchgrass, a *warm season, perennial* grass, begins growth in April or May, and flowers in early summer. The seeds are carried by birds and small mammals. Switchgrass reproduces three ways: sexually by seeds that mature in the late summer and early fall; *asexually* by shoots called *tillers*, which grow above ground near the base of a plant; and *asexually* by the scaly underground stems, known as *rhizomes*.

Significance

Switchgrass is a fair to good quality forage for all types of livestock, such as cattle, horses, sheep, and goats, but only of fair quality for most wildlife species. It does, however, offer good wildlife habitat. The seeds are a food source for various species of waterfowl, shorebirds, upland

birds, and songbirds. The grass provides excellent yields of seed, vigorous growth, and high forage values when young. As the plant becomes mature, the nutrient content and *palatability* decline, causing the forage to become practically worthless nutritionally during the late summer and early fall. Because switchgrass decreases under grazing pressure, its abundance easily can be reduced if livestock are not well managed. Switchgrass can produce between 3,000 and 4,000 pounds (1,364 to 1818 kg) of forage per acre. Switchgrass produces excellent hay, and is often used with other grasses on blowing sands for erosion control.

During the days of the great buffalo hunt, Indians avoided laying their meat near switchgrass as it would adhere to the meat causing it to stick to a person's throat when eaten.

Glossary

- Asexually** - the type of reproduction that is accomplished by an individual without the help of another individual. The resulting offspring will be genetically identical to the adult.
- Ligules** - a small projection on the upper side and at the base of the leaf blade where it joins the sheath. This structure can be in the form of hairs or a membrane.
- Palatability** - suitability for eating by livestock or other grazing animals.
- Perennial** - a plant that lives for more than two years.
- Rhizomes** - underground stems that are capable of reproducing new plants.
- Tillers** - a shoot arising from the base of a plant which produces other plants.
- Warm season grass** - a grass that produces seed in the warmest months of the growing season.

References

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