

## GRASSES

Native to Tall Grass Prairie

# BIG BLUESTEM

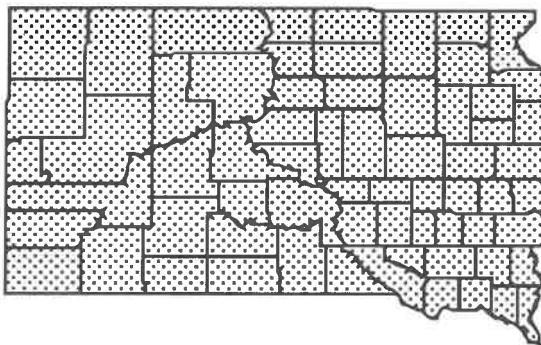
(*Andropogon gerardii*)

## Description

Have you ever heard of "ice cream grass?" Big bluestem is considered the ice cream grass of South Dakota because of its high quality for domestic animals and wildlife food. Big bluestem, also known as turkey's foot, is a grass that can grow as tall as 3 to 8 feet high (0.9 m - 2.4 m). Its scientific name, *Andropogon*, comes from the Greek words, *andro*, meaning man and *pogon*, meaning beard. The name refers to the fuzzy appearance of the seedhead in some species of bluestem. The species name, *gerardii*, refers to the French botanist, L. Gerard (1733-1819) who discovered the plant.



The lower leaves of the big bluestem plant are 1/4 to 1/2 inch (0.6 cm-1.27 cm) wide, and are covered with long, soft hairs. The leaves are bluish and then red-purple as the plant matures each growing season. It is this bluish color that inspired the name big bluestem. The seedhead of big bluestem often branches into three parts, resembling a turkey's foot.



Species Distribution

## Distribution

Big bluestem is native to the tall grass prairies of North America. In eastern South Dakota big bluestem is now found primarily in areas that are too wet or too rocky for cultivation. Only remnants of this once abundant grass remain in the

state because much of the tall grass prairie habitat has been farmed. In western South Dakota, big bluestem is found only in areas that receive extra moisture, such as draws and drainages.

## Natural History

Big bluestem is a warm season grass that starts leaf growth in late spring. The seedhead develops and matures in late summer to fall. This *perennial* species reproduces both sexually by seeds and *asexually* by *rhizomes*. The underground *rhizomes* send up stems that develop into new plants. Therefore, underground portions of big bluestem serve three

functions; food storage, anchoring the plant in the soil, and reproduction.

## Significance

Domestic animals and wildlife use this tall grass for food and shelter. As a food source, big bluestem is called "ice-cream grass" because livestock and wildlife will often eat this species first, before eating any other kinds. Big bluestem becomes very coarse and unfit to eat at the end of its growing season. If heavy grazing during the growing season continues year after year, big bluestem will eventually disappear from the area.

## Glossary

**Asexual reproduction** - 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.

**Rhizome** - modified underground stem that can asexually produce a new plant.

**Perennial** - a plant that can live more than 2 years.

## References

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- Hitchcock, A.J., 1971. Manual of Grasses of the U.S. Dover Publications, New York.
- Looman, Jan, 1982. Prairie Grasses, Pub. 1413. Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Ottawa, Canada
- VanBruggen, Theodore, 1983. Wildflowers, Grasses and Other Plants of the Northern Plains and Black Hills. Badlands Natural History Assoc., Interior, SD 57750.

## Resources for Teachers

- SDSU Range Club, College of Agricultural and Biological Sciences, Brookings, SD 57007, dried plant mounts.
- BHSU Herbarium, Spearfish, SD 57799, dried plant mounts.
- County Extension Agents, U.S. Forest Service and Soil Cons. Service Offices (See Natural Source Directory).

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