



GRASSES

Native to Tallgrass Prairie

Prairie Cordgrass

(*Spartina pectinata*)

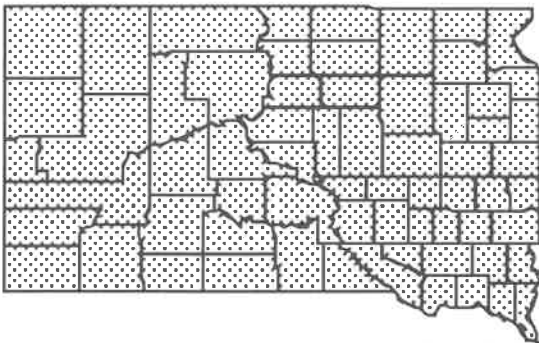
Description

George Catlin, an artist and explorer of the American West in the 1800's, once described a prairie in Kansas as, "so high that we are obliged to stand in our stirrups in order to look over its waving tops as we are riding through it." This may very well have been a field of prairie cordgrass that he and his horse were passing through. This grass is known to reach heights of 4 to 10 feet (1.2 to 3 meters), giving it the distinction of being one of the tallest grasses native to North America.

Spartina, in the plant's scientific name, comes from the Greek word, *spartine*, meaning "a cord made from spartes." This is a reference to the tough, coarse leaves. The species name *pectinata* comes from the Greek word *pecten*, meaning comb. This refers to the comb-like appearance of the one-sided *spikes* on the plant's seed head. Each plant



produces 10 to 30 *spikes*. The flowers in the *spikes* are arranged in tight rows on one side of the flowering branches, like the teeth of a comb. These spikes are 1.5 to 3 inches (3.8 to 7.6 cm) long, and fringed with short *awns*. The leaves of prairie cordgrass grow up to 30 inches (76 cm) long, tapering off to a sharp point. They are smooth and shiny on the surface, and have sharp, tiny teeth on the margins, giving them an abrasive feel. The Lakota name for the species is *santúha tańka*.



Species Distribution

Distribution

Prairie cordgrass is native to the tallgrass prairie and is found in wet prairies, roadsides, marshy meadows, and along streams, dams, and drainages. The

common nickname "sloughgrass," given to prairie cordgrass, refers to the wet conditions in which it grows.

Prairie cordgrass has a wide distribution. It is found in the wet prairies of Canada, and is native to all but eight states of the Southwest and Southeast United States. In South Dakota, prairie cordgrass can be found in almost any wet or moist area; however, it is more abundant in the eastern part of the state. It is often found in pure stands.

Natural History

Prairie cordgrass is capable of reproducing both sexually by seeds and asexually by rhizomes. Rhizomes are scaly, stout, woody underground stems that develop into new plants. Rhizomes form a dense, tough mat beneath the ground that protects the soil from eroding away. A closely related European species has assumed great importance as a soil binder along the coastal areas of the

Netherlands, Northern France, and Southern England. Prairie cordgrass is a warm season, *perennial* grass that begins its growth in early spring. The seedhead or *spikes* develop in late summer.

Significance

When prairie cordgrass has matured and reached the end of its growing season, the plant is very coarse. Domestic and wild animals will eat it only in the early spring when the plant is succulent and tender. The species can produce forage at a rate of 3,000 to 4,000 pounds (1364 to 1818 kg) per acre. Prairie cordgrass is sometimes cut for hay, although the ground it grows in is seldom plowed because of its wetness. Prairie cordgrass produces good hiding cover for waterfowl and their young. American Indians and pioneers used the long leaves and stout stems of prairie cordgrass for thatching roofs and lodges.

Glossary

Asexually - (asexual reproduction) - a type of reproduction that is accomplished by an individual without genetic contribution from another individual. The resulting offspring is genetically identical to the parent plant.

Awn - a bristle-like appendage on a plant.

Spikes - part of the seedhead that contains the flowers and seeds of the grass plant.

Rhizomes- underground stems capable of asexually producing a new plant.

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

References

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Illustration by Bellamy Parks Jansen provided by University of Nebraska Press.

Publication of the *Prairie Cordgrass* fact sheet was funded through a Natural Resource Conservation Education Grant, USDA, Forest Service.