

Little Bluestem

Kansas State Grass



Facts about Little Bluestem

- The Kansas Legislature designated Little Bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, as the State Grass in 2010 at the urging of Kansas school children and the Kansas Native Plant society. As a state icon, Little Bluestem celebrates our prairie heritage.
- The scientific name is of Latin origin. The genus *Schizachyrium* comes from “schizein” meaning “to split” and “achyron” meaning “chaff.” The species *scoparium* comes from “scopa” meaning “broom.”
- Little Bluestem is native to every county in Kansas. As a dominant grass of the prairies, its historical populations have been reduced by agriculture and overgrazing.
- Little Bluestem reaches heights of 2 to 4 feet at maturity. Its cousin, Big Bluestem, grows up to 8 feet tall at maturity. Comparable to other prairie grasses, it tolerates drought with roots extending 5 to 8 feet below the surface.
- Little Bluestem grows in a variety of locations such as prairies, dry hills, open woods and in a variety of soil types, including deep or shallow and fine-textured or rocky soils.
- The new basal shoots are greenish-blue to purplish, elongating into thin bluish leaf blades up to 12 inches long. Little Bluestem propagates by seeds and short underground rootstocks.
- Early growth begins in April, but as a warm season grass, its growth rate increases substantially as temperatures increase during summer months. Small wind-pollinated flowers are formed in July to September, followed by its fuzzy white seed heads that persist through winter.
- In fall, Little Bluestem brightens the prairie and our landscapes as it turns a blazing copper orange.

Animal Uses of Little Bluestem

- Prairie grazers such as bison, antelope and domestic cattle feed upon the tender spring growth.
- Prairie voles line their nests with the leaves as well as eating them.
- Many insects feed upon the fine leaf blades, including grasshoppers, beetles, thrips and the caterpillars of several species of Skipper butterflies and the Common Wood-nymph butterfly.
- These insects are relished by many grassland birds, such as the meadowlark, that depend upon the seeds for winter survival.
- Unlike most grasses that fall over in winter, Little Bluestem retains its clumping form and provides valuable shelter for bird and small mammals.

Human Uses of Little Bluestem

- Ranchers know that Little Bluestem can produce 3/4 to 2 tons of forage per acre for livestock. Hay is used as nutritious winter feed for cattle and other livestock.
- Conservationists plant Little Bluestem and other prairie grasses to prevent soil erosion and to provide wildlife habitat.
- Prairie grasses, such as Little Bluestem, remove carbon from the atmosphere and store it in the soil, which in turn improves soil structure.
- Gardeners appreciate Little Bluestem because of its beauty and ability to withstand drought conditions. Urban landscapes increasingly include this native grass as a border plant.