

Let's Go Native!

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

Dreaming of a nice stand of grass that you don't have to continuously pull or dig out of your flowerbeds? Or maybe a lawn area that needs mowing and watering infrequently? Well, expand your horizons and explore the idea of planting one or more varieties of native grasses. Native grasses are becoming popular not only as turf grasses but as ornamental grasses to enhance and give texture to your landscape. Hundreds of grasses are native to North America and those mentioned here are only a few that have the potential to become important elements in a your Central Texas landscape.

Whether you are looking for a new turf grass to replace the Bermuda grass in your lawn or if you are wanting to give a softer look to your landscape there are several grasses to choose from that will grow well in our area: Sideoats Grama grass was designated as the state grass of Texas in 1971. It is a small clump forming grass with showy, reddish- orange stems with two rows of small flowers, mostly on one side. Sideoats has no serious insect or disease problems and can be used in mass plantings in meadows, on slopes, native plant gardens or naturalized areas. It may also be grown as a turf grass and regularly mowed to two to four inches. It is a winter hardy and drought resistant perennial grass. Buffalo Grass is a native prairie grass that has been adapted as a turf grass and is being used as an important lawn grass in minimum maintenance areas. Its short stature and dense sod requires little water and withstands extreme heat and cold once established. Blue Grama forms a short grass that is drought tolerant and excellent stands of this grass can be readily established from seed. Short turf grasses such, as Blue Grama and Buffalo Grass sown together are a good choice for your lawn. This proven combination grows a maximum of 5-8 inches high if left unmown. It requires no extra watering once established; it requires no fertilizer; it is not subject to diseases or pests and it is a natural beauty. Switch Grass, grows 3-6 feet tall, serves as an excellent wildlife cover in winter, and it is a fast growing grass that is good around ponds and takes full sun to part shade. Little Bluestem is a beautiful blue-green bunch grass turning red-bronze after a frost with fluffy, silver-white seeds. It grows 2-3 feet at maturity and grows well with Sideoats Grama. Another native grass, Bushy Bluestem, is great for restoring wet areas near ponds and stream banks. It prefers full sun and the bushy seed heads make a comfy nesting material for many little creatures.

You really have a variety of choices. Some others you may like are: Inland Seoats, a native perennial, is a clumping, deciduous grass liked for its showy, drooping flowers and rich, bamboo-like foliage. It will grow well in dry shade and the clumps spread slowly by seed. A mounding evergreen perennial, Blue Sedge, has soft, blue-gray foliage gracefully arching outward. This is also great in containers. Lindheimer Muhly Grass, also a native perennial, gives you soft blue foliage that produces purplish flower spikes that turn gray in winter. Switch Grass "Prairie Sky" is another native perennial bunch grass with bluish-green foliage with steel colored blooms in September. This grass turns golden in fall and tan after frost. It withstands areas with bad drainage. Mexican Feather Grass, an evergreen, perennial native is a fine leaved, bright green grass with soft flower and seed heads in late spring. It is a clump grass that is well behaved and is great as an accent or planted in mass. It looks beautiful blowing in the gentle breezes of spring and summer. All of these varieties of grasses are a larval food source for butterflies and cover for wildlife.

If you decide to explore and be creative by using any or a combination of these varieties in your landscape, the most important elements of success are in the preparation of the area, proper seeding and planting methods, and watering. Always follow manufacturer's recommendations for soil preparation and calculating square foot area for seeds, etc. But, most of all, be patient! Natives take extra time growing deep, strong roots.

By using native grasses, whether as a lawn or as focal plantings in beds, you are creating a softer look and adding texture to your landscape. These plantings can be beautiful when in bloom. Native grasses prevent erosion on slopes and hard to mow areas. Since they are pollinated by the wind, they will need room to grow over time. For continuous color, plant wildflowers along with the grasses for spring and summer color until your grasses bloom in September. The grasses will be

especially colorful in October giving your landscape an ever-changing look. Grasses are valuable to wildlife by providing food and shelter. Insects, spiders, toads and lizards - even snakes - are important ingredients to any healthy prairie, yard, or ecosystem. Even the tiny creatures living beneath your soil are working hard for you to improve the health of your yard.