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Turkeyfoot Grass

By Lydia Holley

Turkeyfoot grass, or big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), is a tall native grass you may wish to consider placing in your garden if you have a naturalistic or prairie style planting. It is called turkeyfoot due to the three-pronged plumes that form in fall, which resemble the shape of a turkey's foot.

If you plant it, give it plenty of room. It will grow from six to eight feet tall, and will spread. This quality allows it to be used for erosion control on sandy soils, and can help amend the soil's structure. According to Scott Vogt, turkeyfoot has a "root system that can extend down more than 10 feet. Each year, a third of these roots die, opening up channels for water." Those long roots make turkeyfoot grass drought tolerant, and it will grow well in lean, unfertilized soil, but will also tolerate periods of high rainfall, and even standing water for a short period of time.

This grass was one of the four main grasses that dominated the tallgrass prairies of the past, where quail, wrens, sparrow, and other birds would nest, hidden by the tall stalks of grass. Its native range extends from Canada to Mexico, covering most of the United States, including Texas. It is the host plant for at least two species of butterflies. It is not usually found in pastures because cattle tend to overgraze it, since according to Lady Bird Johnson Wildlife Center, "cattle love it so much - some ranchers refer to it as ice cream for cows."

Turkeyfoot grass is attractive all year, with blue-green foliage in spring and summer, turning rust-colored in fall. It should be cut back in early spring. If you have the space, you may want to consider putting turkeyfoot grass in your garden.

For more information, call 903-675-6130, email hendersonCMGA@gmail.com, or visit txmq.org/hendersonmq.

