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Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

SPECIES • WARM-SEASON GRASS

Little Bluestem



Photo by: Jennifer Anderson-Cruz: Hosted by the USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

General Information

Little Bluestem is an important native forage grass and was a major component of the tall-grass prairies and savannahs of Illinois.

Principal use is for hay and grazing and is rarely planted as a monoculture unless the intended use is seed production, which is generally about 200 pounds per acre.

Little Bluestem is a popular species to include when reseeding cropland to a native mixture, providing nesting cover for many species of ground-nesting birds, and is also valuable for watershed protection.

Characteristics

Little Bluestem is a moderately tall, upright, perennial, warm-season bunchgrass that reaches a height of 24 to 48 inches at maturity.

The slender leaves are bluish green or green and turn reddish brown at maturity. The sheaths are flattened, and the tillers are almost spoon shaped at the bases.

The sheaths are hairy, but that varies. Some sheaths are almost without hair. Growth starts in spring and matures in late summer. Seeds ripen in early fall.

Little Bluestem reproduces from tillers, short rhizomes and seed production. The root system is dense, and commonly extends to about five and a half feet.

Adaptability

Little Bluestem will thrive over a wide range of soils in all parts of the state and does not seem to be well adapted to wet soils.

Establishment

Little Bluestem can be planted any time between December and June, when moisture and growing conditions are favorable. Seed into a well prepared, firm seedbed that is free of competition. In areas where wind erosion is a concern, seed into a dead litter cover.

Check with the Natural Resources Conservation Service or University Extension for proper seeding rates.

New plantings should be rested until well established, usually one to two years. Weeds need to be controlled if there are three weeds per square foot, or they form a 50 percent canopy.

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Management

To maintain plant health and vigor, no more than half of the green growth of Little Bluestem should be removed during the growing season.

Little Bluestem can be grazed closer during the plant's dormant season, but plants should not be grazed closer than three inches.

For optimum hay quality and production, cut at the time of initial seed set.

Without proper grazing or prescribed burning, Little Bluestem bunches can form dead centers.

Without a planned grazing system, the grass should be rested during the grazing season for about 90 days every two or three years.

Prescribed burning in late winter or spring will increase seed production and improve forage quality. However, if Little Bluestem is burned during very dry conditions, the crown of the plants can suffer severe damage.

The crude protein of Little Bluestem will peak in mid spring at about 11 percent.

Quality declines with growth stage, dropping rapidly as the plant matures and sets seed.

Dormant season crude protein will be about 2 to 3 percent, depending upon weathering.

Total digestible nutrients will peak at about 58 percent and will drop to a low of 36 percent during mid-winter.

Where to Get Help

For more information about big bluestem, contact the local Natural Resources Conservation Service listed in the telephone directory under "U.S. Government," or the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.

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