

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet
SPECIES • WARM-SEASON GRASS

Caucasian Bluestem



General Use

Caucasian Bluestem is a warm-season, perennial bunchgrass, part of the group known as Old World Bluestems, and is not related to native bluestems.

Caucasian Bluestem is ideally suited for marginal cropland areas where farming of annual crops is unprofitable and causes excessive wind and water erosion. The grass also has been used successfully to reclaim disturbed lands. Caucasian Bluestem generally is less desirable for wildlife than most native warm-season grasses.

Characteristics

Caucasian Bluestem is an erect, fine-stemmed, leafy grass. Forage yields usually exceed other adapted Old World Bluestems. In southern Illinois, yields of Caucasian Bluestem equal or surpass most native warm-season grasses.

In general, Caucasian Bluestem exhibits good establishment characteristics, seed spreading, forage yield, forage quality and stand persistence if adapted to the site and managed properly. Caucasian Bluestem starts spring growth a few days later than switch grass, but earlier than big Bluestem and Indian grass. The ability of Caucasian Bluestem to produce considerable forage in the summer and has contributed to its popularity in southern Illinois. Caucasian Bluestem may be superior to native warm-season grasses in producing regrowth in August and September, with adequate rain. No serious disease problems have been reported with Caucasian Bluestem.

Adaptability

Caucasian Bluestem will produce on a wide range of soils, and prefers the finer texture soils, such as loams, clay, and silt loams, but will grow acceptably well on good, sandy-loam soils.

Caucasian Bluestem is not well adapted to extremely sandy soils (sugar sand and blow sand) that do not have a close, finer subsoil. Failure or poor production can be expected on soils that are extremely sandy, on wetland soils with long-term supersaturation, on soils classified as having perched water tables, on saline soils, and on soils inclined to produce severe iron chlorosis.

Caucasian Bluestem is best adapted to southern Illinois and compares less favorably to native warm-season grasses when grown in northern Illinois, where stands have died because they lacked winter hardiness.

Establishment

Spring seedings (April and May) of Caucasian Bluestem are preferred. Seedings made later may be successful if moisture is available. Seed into a clean, firm, weed-free seedbed.

Seedbeds should be firmed with a roller prior to drilling or broadcasting seed. If the seed is planted using the broadcast method, it also should be rolled afterward to ensure good seed to soil contact. Seed should be covered with about one-fourth inch of soil. Contact your local NRCS or University Extension office for specific seeding recommendations. Some success has been obtained with no-till seedings in closely-grazed or herbicide-treated sod, reducing weeds and soil erosion.

Controlling weeds at seeding time is important because grass establishment and survival can be suppressed by weed competition for moisture and sunlight. Weed control must be provided by tillage during seedbed preparation, and later by mowing and proper utilization.

Although Caucasian Bluestem has shown tolerance to residual herbicides, none have been cleared for weed control.

Management

The best time to graze Caucasian Bluestem is June through September. Caucasian Bluestem should not be grazed closer than (three to four inches) to keep the vegetative stage. Thus, maintaining forage quality and palatability in first year stands. Accumulations of large amounts of forage can hinder stand development and production. If excess forage is present, haying may be necessary.

The best use of Caucasian Bluestem is in a grazing system that includes cool-season grasses, mixtures of cool-season grasses and legumes, and one or more species of native warm-season grasses.

An annual fertilizer application of 50 to 60 pounds of nitrogen is, usually adequate for optimum yields. Phosphorus and Potassium should be applied according to soil test results.

Weeds in established stands of Caucasian Bluestem can be minimized by maintaining plant vigor and density. Occasional use of approved herbicides will reduce competition and help restore plant vigor to an overgrazed stand. Prescribed burning of plant residues at initiation of spring growth helps control insects, decreases competition, and stimulates growth.

A fall height of six to eight inches should be attained 30 days before frost, allowing for replenishment of root reserves, and provides additional insulation through winter months. Caucasian Bluestem may be grazed again after frost.

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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