

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

SPECIES • WARM-SEASON GRASS

Side-Oats Grama



General Information

Side-Oats Grama is an important component of the mid-grass prairie and grows on shallow soils in the tall-grass prairies.

The primary use is as a component mixture for reseeding cropland or native grazing lands.

Side-Oats Grama is used for grazing by all classes of livestock, as nesting cover for wildlife and for seed harvest. The seeds are known to be eaten by wild turkeys, and maybe eaten by other wildlife species as well. There are no known forage quality problems with Side-Oats Grama.

Characteristics

Side-Oats Grama is a perennial, warm-season, weakly rhizomanous grass that grows 12 to 24 inches tall.

The leaf blades are flat with hairs along the outer margins. There are 30 to 50 spikelets that hang off one side of a slender, zigzag rachis much like the feathers hanging off an Indian war lance - thus earning the name side-oats.

Growth begins early in the spring with seeds forming in mid-summer. Rhizomes can be as long as four inches, and the plant has an extensive root system. Rooting depth can be as much as six feet in deep soil.

Adaptation

Side-Oats Grama grows naturally from south Texas to Canada, throughout the Great Plains and as far east as Virginia.

Side-Oats Grama grows on all but wet, very sandy or saline soils, but grows best on calcareous soils, and is less productive as soil pH decreases.

Establishment

Side-Oats Grama can be planted any time between December and June with a very high success rate.

Seeds should be planted into a well-prepared, firm seedbed that is free of competition. In areas where wind erosion is a concern, seeding into a dead litter cover is needed.

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

The stand should not be used until well established, usually after one or two years. To enhance stand establishment, weeds must be controlled if there are three or more per square foot, or when there is a 50 percent weed canopy.

Management

Side-Oats Grama is a grass that is palatable both green and while dormant.

For optimum production, grazing should be managed to harvest no more than half the growing leaf material.

Since plant reproduction can occur from rhizomes, maintaining a healthy root system is important.

Healthy Side-Oats Grama plants will make rhizomes in the winter and early spring if managed properly during the prior year. Side-Oats Grama responds well to planned grazing system management.

Crude protein will peak at about 10 percent in mid spring just before seed production. Quality is dependent on growth stage, decreasing as the plant goes into seed ripening. Dormant season crude protein will be around 4 percent, depending upon weathering. Total digestible nutrients will peak at about 60 percent, decreasing to about 30 percent in mid-winter.

Prescribed burning does not alter production but can stimulate seed production.

Generally, when Side-Oats Grama is planted as a component of a mixture, fertilizer is not recommended.

As a monoculture, about 35 pounds of forage is produced for each pound of nitrogen applied.

Seed production has been reported in the range of 150 to 400 pounds per acre, depending on moisture conditions.

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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