

# GRASSES

## Bluestem, Big 'Bonilla'

*Andropogon gerardii* 'Bonilla'

Native. Major component of tallgrass prairie. Produces "turkey foot" seed heads. Plants turn red in the fall and remain upright in winter. Excellent cattle food. Grows 3-7 feet tall.

Description: This warm-season, perennial tallgrass has short scaly rhizomes. Coarse seed stalks reach 3 to 7 feet. Each stalk produces one or more hairy, 3 to 6 fingered "turkey foot" spikes, typically 1-1/2 to 4 inches long. Leaves are numerous, large, 1/4 to 1/2 inch wide, usually with coarse hairs. Plants remain green throughout the summer, turning rusty red with maturity.

Distribution/Habitat: Big bluestem, a North American native, occurs in all states except in the far West. Its primary range is the central and southern plains where it typifies lowland tallgrass communities. It is found statewide in South Dakota, abundantly in the eastern part on unbroken soils as well as in the Sandhills. Farther west in the state it occupies small protected areas with favorable soil moisture.

Comments: Big bluestem, or turkeyfoot, was the dominant species of the tallgrass prairie. It is excellent in quality, quantity, and palatability. Abundance quickly decreases with frequent mowing or heavy grazing pressure, although it proves remarkably resilient when pressure is removed. It is frequently seeded for prairie restoration; 'Champ,' 'Pawnee,' 'Bison,' and 'Bonilla' are recommended varieties.

**Credit:** James E. Johnson & Gary E. Larson, Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains. SDSU, Brookings, SD. B-566 (rev.) August 1999. Page 18.

**Photo Credit:** USDA-NRCS Plant Materials Center & SDSU Ag Experiment Station



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