

GRASSES

Bluestem, Little 'Badlands' ecotype

Schizachyrium scoparium 'Badlands'

Native. Perennial bunchgrass which grows in mixed-grass prairie. Drought tolerant. Often grows on dry hillsides. Attractive seed heads are fluffy when mature. Foliage turns pinkish-red in autumn. Grows 1-3 ft tall.

Description: Little bluestem is a warm-season, perennial bunchgrass 1 to 3 feet tall. Spikelets are fuzzy and fluffy white at maturity and borne in several spike branches which are lateral and terminal on the culms. Leaf blades are slightly folded; basal portions of stems and leaf sheaths are somewhat flattened and hairless, unlike big bluestem. Foliage reddens at maturity. Little bluestem often exists in nearly pure stands.

Distribution, habitat: This native midgrass is broadly distributed from southern Quebec to Alberta, throughout the United States, and well into Mexico. It is absent in five western states. In South Dakota little bluestem is important in the tallgrass prairie, the Sandhills and in the Black Hills. It can grow well on every soil texture over a wide pH range.

Comments: Little bluestem is a tallgrass prairie increaser and a mixed prairie decreaser. Livestock and hoofed wildlife graze new shoots around the edge of older little bluestem plants. Such selective grazing, under moderate use, may cause the erroneous conclusion that little bluestem is not grazed. Little bluestem is nutritious and readily eaten when immature. Across most of the state it is a valued summer forage and also is used occasionally for hay. Little bluestem is seeded with other native grasses for erosion control and grazing. Two adapted varieties are 'Blaze' and 'Camper.' Little blue stem provides nesting, roosting and cover for upland birds, plus seed and forage for mice. The Lakota name means "small red grass." Dried leaves and culms were rubbed into soft fiber for moccasin insulation. Some tribes used little bluestem switches in ceremonial sweat lodges.

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 64.

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



USDA-NRCS Plant Materials Center



SDSU Ag Experiment Station

