

GRASSES

Cordgrass, Prairie ‘Red River’

Spartina pectinata ‘Red River’

Native tall grass for wet sites. Originally selected from native stands in SD, ND, and MN. Spreads to form a colony by thick rhizomatous roots. Leaves have sharp edges. Can stabilize soil and filter water in riparian areas. Interesting seedheads.



Description: Prairie Cordgrass is a warm-season perennial, 3 to 8 feet tall, and is strongly rhizomatous with tough, scaly rhizomes. As many as 10 to 30 one-sided, comb-like spikes can be present in the panicle on a coarse flowering stem. Spikelets are compressed laterally, with glumes stoutly awned. Coarse, thick leaf blades up to 30 inches long are very abrasive with roughened margins that can cut skin when rubbed from tip to base.

Distribution/Habitat: This native occupies wet soils of Canadian prairie provinces and in all states but eight in the Southwest and Southeast. It grows in pure stands bordering sloughs, prairie potholes, ditches, and wet prairies. Associated species include switchgrass, Canada wildrye, sedges, and rushes. In South Dakota prairie Cordgrass is more abundant in the east; it is mostly confined to drainage ways in the west.

Comments: Prairie cordgrass is a valuable wetlands sediment filter and soil erosion stabilizer. The variety ‘Red River’ is sold for these purposes and for prairie landscaping. It is little eaten by livestock except early in the spring or when other forage is dry. Because of its tough and abrasive leaves, prairie Cordgrass is sometimes called “ripgut.” Some use by birds is made of cordgrass seed. Stands are used for nesting and cover; muskrats eat the foliage. Settlers, and Omaha Indians before them, thatched roof tops with prairie Cordgrass stems prior to covering with earth.

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 68.

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