

Native Fall Grasses

November ushers in the fall season and the fantastic show of our native Texas grasses. Deviating from my normally single plant profile, this article will focus on some common, albeit native grasses. I'm a big advocate of grasses, so we'll discuss several grasses that not only have multiple uses, but indirectly benefit the environment as well (more on this later).

Grasses are becoming more and more popular with the increased awareness of water conservation, use of fertilizers and pesticides, and deer resistance. Below are four favorites of mine: big muhly, inland sea oats, gulf muhly, and grama grass.

Although not suited for any landscape, these grasses provide cover and food for wildlife and enhance a native grass bed, or improve vegetative prairies. Grasses are hardy, drought tolerant, look great almost year round and some through the winter months. They do not require any pesticides or even irrigation (indirect benefit).



- ❑ ***Muhlenbergia filipes***, Gulf Muhly is accentuated by the fine, mauve seedheads in the fall, and a favorite among ornamental grass fans. Gulf Muhly has blue/green needle like foliage, giving it a stiff upright growth habit, and grows up to 3-4' height and can have a 2-3 foot spread. Gulf Muhly will grow in drought conditions as well as wet conditions. Does not like a thick coat of mulch around the base of the plant (also goes for the other grasses).



- ❑ ***Muhlenbergia lindheimeri***, Lindheimer's Muhly, Big Muhly has an upright growth habit and also blue/green foliage. However, this grass can get up to 4-5' in height, so plan space accordingly. This grass blooms in the fall with the inflorescence at first pink-tinted, then later fade to tan. A great choice for the landscape, bringing contrast with the upright foliage and also this grass is non-invasive. Best planted in dry sites but Big Muhly can tolerate some wet conditions if the soil is well drained. This grass is a good choice for calcareous soils and is often used as a replacement for Pampas Grass in the Austin and San Antonio areas.

- ❑ ***Chasmanthium latifolium***, Indian wood-oats, Inland sea oats, Wild oats, River oats. This is a 2-4 ft., clump-forming, perennial grass bearing large, drooping, oat-like flower spikelets from slender, arching branches. The blue-green, bamboo-like leaves often turn a bright yellow-gold, especially in sunnier sites, in fall. Each blade can reach up to 8" (20 cm) long. Inland sea oats is one of the few grasses that require shade, because the foliage will sunburn. In full sun they will bleach to a light yellow-green. The leaves persist well into winter, turning coppery beige and then brown. As nice as the foliage is, the most attractive features are the flowers and seedheads. Each flat flower spike is 3/4 to one inch (1.90 - 2.54 cm) long. They start out vertical, but as they mature, their weight causes the stems to droop. The attractive seed heads are often used in both dried and fresh flower arrangements. Beware that inland sea oats will re-seed profusely, so give them plenty of room. Plant under live oaks or near building eaves where shade is an issue.



- ❑ ***Bouteloua gracilis***, Blue Grama forms a short 3 to 6 inch height grass that requires very little water per year. If left unmown during the flowering period, the grass produces a 10 inch seed stem (which also looks nice in dried arrangements). Excellent stands can be readily established from seed. Because of its wide adaptation (all soil types, including alkaline soil) and ease of establishment, Blue Grama is used extensively as a water conserving grass. It makes an excellent lawn grass in sunny areas in combination with Buffalograss. Only 12-14 in. in full flower, this is among the shortest of the native ornamental grasses. It is fine-leaved and produces blue-green seedheads which are suspended horizontally like tiny brushes from the tip of each stem. The plant turns tan when dormant. Blue grama grows in bunches in the south, and as a sod-former in the north and at high elevations. It is a perennial. *Bouteloua hirsuta* var. *pectinata* is another nice grama that is slightly taller. I wish these varieties were in more commercial production.