

## Switch Grass - *Panicum virgatum*

Switch grass is a great addition to the ornamental grass palette. A native warm-season grass, this spreading perennial grows in large, tall clumps from 3-6 feet tall, and should be used in the landscape more often. The sturdy, flat leaf blade can grow as much as 30 in long and stems usually have a reddish tint. The inflorescences, which have reddish-purple anthers, are borne in open 10 in panicles. They produce shiny teardrop shaped 1/8 in seeds. Switch grass can develop long rhizomes (underground stems) that grow horizontally to interlace and form a thick, dense sod, however switch grass grows as a bunchgrass. The roots of switch grass may reach depths of ten ft or more. The rhizomes are in active growth from late winter through mid-spring.



Switch grass typically turns a nice pale yellow in the fall, but some cultivars have been selected for more striking colors. 'Shenandoah' has outstanding burgundy foliage - the leaves start showing dark red tones by midsummer and are fully colored by early fall. 'Dallas Blues' has bluish foliage and 'Heavy Metal' is a stiffly upright switch grass characterized by metallic lavender-blue foliage with a waxy white bloom; it turns bright yellow and displays dark burgundy seed heads in the fall. 'Rehbraun' is a 3-4 ft cultivar with foliage that turns red in the late summer. 'Haense Herms' has pink flowers and dark red autumn leaves.



Switch grass cultivars are drought tolerant once established and they can tolerate soggy soils, so they grow well in spots that tend to be wet in the spring. It even grows in seasonally poor drainage, and withstands moderate soil salinity. They can bear a wide range of soil types, including dry ones, but prefers moist, sandy or clay soils. Cut back clumps to the ground in late winter to early spring, but the resulting stubble should be left for insulation. Once a stand has been established, it will benefit from moderate fertilization.

Plant switch grass at the back of the perennial border or as a tall screen, in wildflower meadows, marshes, or lakeshores, or use to add fall color in plant beds-- most anywhere ornamental grasses are utilized. It is also a great wildlife forage plant. Suitable as a low windbreak plant, switch grass is a viable alternative to help stabilize soils and prevent erosion, particularly on slopes and sand dunes, near dikes and other critical areas. It can be very competitive and will sometimes crowd out other plants.

Propagate from seed or root division while dormant. Switch grass seeds must be firmly planted 1/4-1/2 inches deep and begin to sprout when the soil temperature reaches 68°F in the spring.

### Interesting Tidbits:

- The Latin name *virgatum*, means wand-like.
- Switch grass is currently being studied as an alternative energy source for producing ethanol.
- The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) believes that biofuels—made from crops of native grasses, such as fast-growing switch grass—could reduce the nation's dependence on foreign oil, curb emissions of the "greenhouse gas" carbon dioxide, and strengthen America's farm economy.