

# Little Bluestem – Perennial of the Year for 2022!

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**Spring appearance**

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/little-bluestem-schizachyrium-scoparium/>

The Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), while technically classified as “grass” is not to be underestimated since it plays important ecological functions as well as being an aesthetically pleasing addition to any garden.

This perennial plant is native to prairie grasslands and pine forests growing as far south as Mexico into the U.S and Canada. It was historically a part of the diet of bison and used by Native Americans as lining for moccasins. Today, the main ecological role being for birds who use the stems for habitat and their seeds for food as well as hosts for insect activity, especially skippers. Additionally, researchers use this plant to model the distribution and spread of wildfires to make predictions for land management decisions.

True to its name, this 1- to 3-foot-tall clumping grass has blue stems that turns a fantastic shade of copper just in time for autumn. As wild plants produce few seeds and germination rates are low, newer cultivars such Aldous, Blaze, Camper, Cimmaron and Pastura are most commonly grown for pastures. For more ornamental uses, Blaze, Itasca and The Blues are recommended. This little plant has big differences in appearance depending on the environmental conditions. In the wild, this drought tolerant plant is often seen growing in well draining soil such as sand and loam making it suitable for gardeners to plant in areas with poor soil quality, sides of banks needing soil erosion control, or just to liven up rock gardens.



**Fall Appearance** <https://www.seedsavers.org/little-bluestem-prairie>

For optimal growth, plan for 5-10 inches of spacing for a plant clump to reach 4-10 inches in diameter with up to 300 stems per plant. In the first year, water regularly until the plant is established with subsequent years only apply a high nitrogen concentration fertilizer (although this resilient plant will be do just fine even in a drought). In late winter or early spring, cut back the plant to 2 inches to promote summer growth. Up to 75% of the stems will flower with a seed dispersal ranch of up to 6 feet but with a low germination rate this plant isn't going far very fast.

Some articles assert that the Little Bluestem is an invasive species because it can outcompete traditional lawns, however, this author would argue that as a native species to Ontario it should have a place in your garden!

Would you like to add this perennial grass to your garden? The RDHS has a limited supply of seeds to give away if you can answer these 3 questions:

- 1) What did Native Americans use the Little Bluestem for?
- 2) What kind of soil conditions can the Little Bluestem be grown in?
- 3) What care does Little Bluestem need?

E-mail your responses to [info@russellgardeners.ca](mailto:info@russellgardeners.ca) with the subject line “Little Bluestem” by February 28, 2022.