

Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)

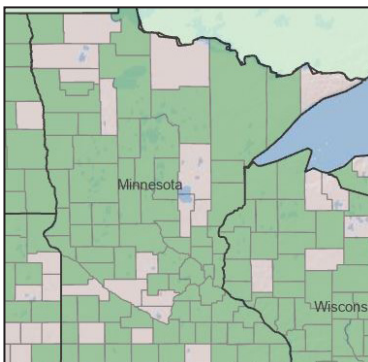
Family: Grass
(Poaceae)

DESCRIPTION: A warm-season grass of tallgrass prairies, open woods and roadsides, this native perennial is named for the color of its stems, which are bluish in summer and red, purple or bronze in fall. Turkey-foot, another common name for the grass, comes from the terminal clusters of spikes, which are sometimes three-parted.

USES: The grass is commonly included in seed mixes for prairie restorations and erosion control. It is used in gardens and landscapes that can accommodate its size. The larvae of several species of skipper butterflies eat it, and birds may shelter in the grass.

REFERENCES:

- [Minnesota Wildflowers](#)
- [Gardening With Native Grasses in Cold Climates; Diane M. Narem, Mary H. Meyer, U of M Libraries Publishing, 2020](#)
- [The Friends of the Wildflower Garden](#)
- [Native Plant Network](#)



Range Map Credit: USDA Plants Database



Photo Credit: Susan Nelson

Planting Recommendations

Big bluestem grows best in mesic soils and full sun. In shade, it will grow shorter and may lodge. Good companions include Indiangrass, switchgrass, gray-headed coneflower and blazing star. Plant the grasses at least 2 feet apart to accommodate growth, and expect an informal, naturalized look as the plants mature. Typically available as plugs, big bluestem can also be grown from seeds collected in October. Sow them immediately outdoors or dry for one to two weeks and store them in a cool, dry

place in a sealed container before sowing. Germination may improve after at least two weeks of cold stratification. Sow seeds in dampened growing mix in seedling pots and cover lightly. Keep the surface damp until germination. Above-ground growth will be minimal the first year as the root systems develop. Because even mature plants do not reach full size until mid-summer, big bluestem cannot compete with faster-growing weeds and cool-season grasses such as the aggressive reed canary grass.

Developed by Susan Nelson, botanist and curator/
author of [Larkspur Plant Resources](#)



STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS: FAC

ID: Growing in arching bunches, the blue-green, sometimes red-tipped leaves reach up to 18 inches long and a half-inch wide. Stems grow 4 to 8 feet tall and are blue-green and smooth with purplish nodes. Terminal clusters of narrow, purple-red spikes flower in July and August, and then turn bronze. Mature spikes are hairy between spikelets.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Sand bluestem (*Andropogon hallii*), native to southwestern Minnesota and Western states, has hairier spikes and grayer, waxier leaves. It thrives in dry soils and spreads more aggressively by rhizomes than big bluestem.