

GRASSES

Dropseed, Prairie



Sporobolus heterolepis

Native. Produces nearly circular tufts of fine leaves which are 4-10" in diameter. Grows in wetter mixed grass prairies. Very attractive in bloom and seed. Interesting accent plant. Can be used to line walkways and edge gardens. Grows 1-3' tall.

Description: This distinctive, warm-season perennial grows in nearly circular tufts 4-10 inches across. Open pyramidal panicles top erect flowering culms 1 to 3-1/2 feet tall. They produce a vanilla-like aroma when in flower. The relatively few spikelets are grayish, producing tiny, rounded, shiny, hardened seeds. Leaves are many, mostly basal, hairless, narrow, flat but somewhat rolled at the tip, yellow-green or reddish when drying, 8 to 20 inches or longer, and distinctively radiating outward from the center of the tuft with tips nearing the ground. Fine, nearly inconspicuous, short hairs are present where the leaf blade attaches to the stem. Ligules are short and membranous.

Distribution/Habitat: Prairie dropseed, a native, occurs from Saskatchewan to Quebec and New York, south and west to Texas and Wyoming. In South Dakota it is found in wetter mixed grass communities statewide, including those in the Black Hills foothills and in the tallgrass prairie. Associated species can include Indiangrass and big bluestem.

Comments: Prairie dropseed is the most palatable and productive dropseed in the northern Great Plains, decreasing in abundance with increasing grazing pressure. Its densely tufted habit with its fine-textured leaves falling away from the center and its fully exerted and open panicles readily distinguish it from other dropseeds. The dense tussocks are vulnerable to heavy hoof action. Prairie dropseed affords cover for small wildlife, and its relatively large seeds are taken by birds and rodents.

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 72.

Photo Credit: USDA-NRCS Plant Materials Center and Walters Garden Catalog

