

GRASSES

Switchgrass 'Dacotah'



Panicum virgatum

Native. Tall, warm-season perennial sod grass. Seed head is an airy panicle. Turns golden yellow in fall/winter. Usually remains upright during winter. Birds make some use of seeds. Grows 3-5 ft. tall

Description: Switchgrass is a tall, warm-season, perennial sod grass. Rather large teardrop-shaped spikelets are borne in open panicles 6 to 18 inches long on coarse stems up to 40 inches tall. Identification is simplified by a V-shaped patch of hair on the upper surface of the leaf blade near the stem. Leaves, up to 2 feet long, are abundant. Tight, large clumps form from numerous scaly rhizomes.

Distribution/Habitat: Switchgrass, a native decreaser, grows in central and eastern Canada, all states except five in the far West and Northwest, and in Central and South America, reaching its greatest abundance in uplands and lowlands of the Tallgrass Prairie. In native stands, switchgrass grows in proximity to big bluestem, prairie Cordgrass, Canada wildrye, and Indiangrass. In South Dakota switchgrass is primarily found in the east but is present in western ravines, extensively in the Sandhills and Black Hills.

Comments: Farming and grazing have reduced switchgrass. It is the favored grass for seeding warm-season upland pastures in central and eastern South Dakota. When used in prairie restoration, other tall grasses and forbs are included. Varieties most common to South Dakota are 'Nebraska 28,' 'Pathfinder,' 'Trailblazer,' 'Dacotah,' 'Forestburg,' and 'Sunburst.' Although not as palatable as some grasses, switchgrass is consumed by livestock as long as stems are green. It is extremely productive with controlled grazing. With careful management, switchgrass makes excellent yields of good quality hay. It provides excellent cover for nesting birds and usually remains standing in winter to serve as good winter cover. Birds make some use of seeds.



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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 50.

Photo Credit: USDA/NRCS Plant Materials Center, & SDSU Ag Experiment Station