

Native Prairie Grass in Common Areas

Most of the common areas in your neighborhood were seeded with native prairie grass to satisfy city code requirements. Unlike common lawn and pasture grass, which start growing in early spring, “warm-season” prairie grasses don’t green up until late spring and thrive in the heat of summer.

WHY NATIVE GRASS?

Native prairie grass was planted in common areas to meet city requirements for water quality. Over the past few decades, states and municipalities have adopted ordinances that stem from the federal Clean Water Act, enacted in 1972. Rules are intended to ensure that water flowing into streams and waterways meets minimum water quality standards. Most pollutants in storm water runoff in suburban settings derive from oil-based contaminants on streets and chemical treatments applied to lawns. Native prairie grass serves as a natural filter for surface water runoff, reducing the quantity of contaminants before water flows into natural waterways.

BENEFITS

- Once established, native grass requires little upkeep. Costs associated with traditional lawn maintenance – watering, mowing, fertilizing, herbicides and pesticides – are greatly reduced.
- Natural prairie grass improves water quality and reduces air and noise pollution.
- Native plants provide diversity and habitat, supporting local birds and wildlife. Song birds, bees, butterflies and other beneficial pollinators are supported by the natural environment.

WHAT TO EXPECT

A mature stand of prairie grass takes 3-5 years to become fully established. Seedlings emerge in late May and early June. The first growing season, plants are tiny, with thin blades that are difficult to detect. Adapted to survival in dry climates, native grass expends most of its energy during the initial growth period developing long tap roots to reach deep into the soil for moisture. Not until the second growing season do grass crowns become small tufts, and in the third and fourth growing season, grasses grow large enough to fill voids and form the graceful seed heads which are so venerated.

Year 1 (sparse, weedy)



Years 2/3 (more natives appearing)



YEARS 3-4 (natives approaching maturity and crowding out weeds)



YEAR 5 (mature stand of grass, lush in summer, colorful in fall)



MAINTENANCE

- During establishment (years 1-5), the natural landscaping should be mowed twice a year, once in the late spring/early summer and again in the fall. This helps suppress weeds and controls woody brush, allowing the native plants to establish. Weed control is critical during this time, often requiring spot treatment with herbicides.
- Once established, natives can out compete most invasive species. Mowing is generally only needed once a year to control woody brush.
- Frequent mowing or mowing too short (less than 6-8 inches) should be avoided as it weakens the native grasses and allows weeds to invade.



Big Bluestem

Andropogon gerardii

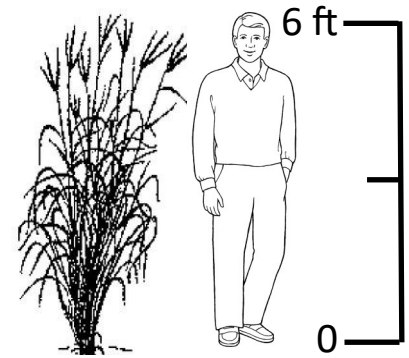
Height: 4.0 - 6.0 ft

Spread: 2.0 - 3.0

Light: Full sun

Moisture: Medium - Dry

Warm season, clump grass



Little Bluestem

Schizachyrium scoparium

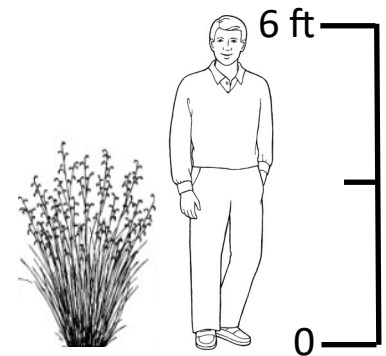
Height: 2.0 - 4.0 ft

Spread: 1.5 - 2.0 ft

Light: Full Sun - Light Shade

Moisture: Medium - Dry

Warm season, clump grass



Indian Grass

Sorghastrum nutans

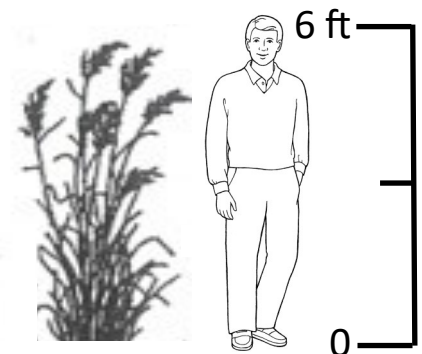
Height: 3.0 - 6.0 ft

Spread (ft): 2.0 - 3.0 ft

Light: Full Sun

Moisture: Medium - Dry

Warm season, clump grass





USDA NRCS Bismarck PMC

Prairie Cordgrass

Spartina pectinata

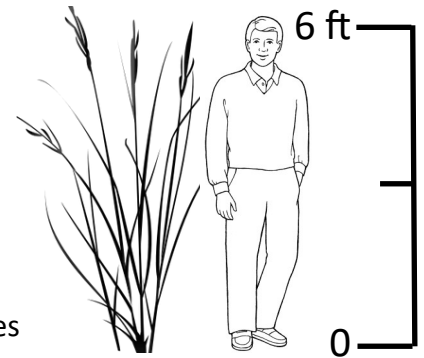
Height: 3.0 - 8.0 ft

Spread: 4.0 - 7.0 ft

Light: Full Sun - Light Shade

Moisture: Wet

Warm season grass, spreads rapidly by rhizomes



University of Wisconsin-Madison

Switchgrass

Panicum virgatum

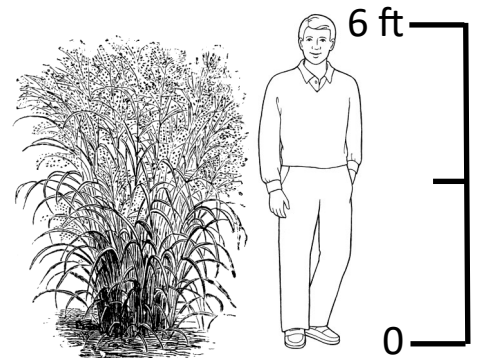
Height: 4.0 - 6.0 ft

Spread: 2.0 - 3.0 ft

Light: Full Sun - Light Shade

Moisture: Medium - Wet

Warm season, clump grass with
sod forming by rhizomes



University of Wisconsin-Madison

Prairie Dropseed

Sporobolus heterolepis

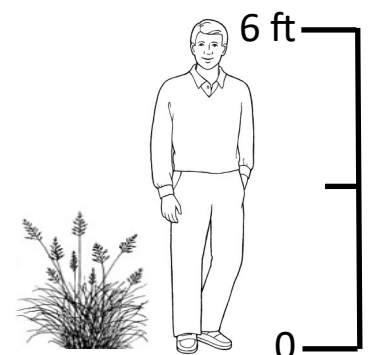
Height: 1.0 - 3.0 ft

Spread: 2.0 - 3.0 ft

Light: Full Sun

Moisture: Medium - Dry

Warm season, clump grass





Western Wheatgrass

Pascopyrum smithii

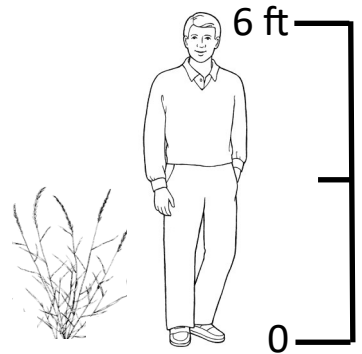
Height: 1.0 - 3.0 ft

Spread:

Light: Full Sun - Light Shade

Moisture: Medium - Moist

Cool season, aggressive sod forming



Side Oats Grama

Bouteloua curtipendula

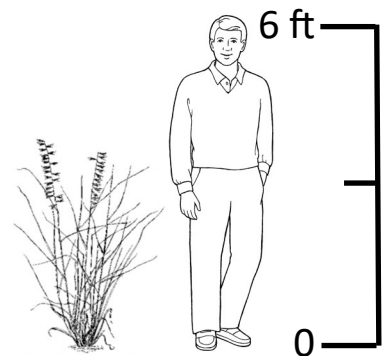
Height: 2.0 - 4.0 ft

Spread: 1.0 - 2.0 ft

Light: Full Sun

Moisture: Medium - Dry

Warm season, clump grass, can be sod forming



Blue Grama Grass

Bouteloua gracilis

Height: 1.0 - 2.0 ft

Spread: 1.5 - 2.0 ft

Light: Full Sun

Moisture: Medium - Dry

Warm season, clump grass

