

A Final Word on *Wild Grasses*

by Nancy Bissett

Many of the small native bunchgrasses should be used in wildflower plantings. In a stable natural system such as a dry prairie, all the niches, or living spaces, are filled, and weeds, the great enemy of wildflower plantings, do not enter. Most niches are occupied by bunchgrasses such as

wiregrass and bluestems, which have very fibrous, spreading root systems. Many wildflowers have small root systems, a few thickened roots, or even bulbs, and so they occupy the openings between the grasses. By

planting small bunchgrasses interspersed with wildflowers, one can achieve a more stable wildflower planting where maintenance will consist of cutting back the garden every couple of years, rather than endlessly pulling weeds in a desperate attempt to stay ahead. Smaller bunchgrasses also

provide a framework of many shades of green for the wildflower garden. Wiregrass and many of the other bunchgrasses are a staple food

for the gopher tortoise. Butterflies such as the nymphs and satyrs use grasses as their larval food.

Some grasses, such as the lovegrasses, reseed easily, and so make good candidates for restoration work. If an area is replanted with plugs, a natural density or spacing of around two

feet apart may be too expensive. A wider spacing can be used as natural reseeding will fill the other niches in time. Some flatwoods and sandhill grasses,

such as wiregrass and lopsided Indian grass, recolonize slowly. Early reseeding by the lovegrasses will help compete with obnoxious weedy species.

Though bunchgrasses seem to dislike root disturbance and are not easily dug, divided, and replanted, they establish very quickly from containers or direct

seed germination and fungal problems in the grasses.

Anyone who thinks wiregrass is a lackluster grass hasn't seen Audubon's Kissimmee Prairie in the fall after a summer fire. Looking to the horizon, you

will see waving fields of golden seed stalks. Look down and you will see hundreds of different species of wildflowers and grasses growing among the wiregrass. Wiregrass, *Aristida beyrichiana* (formerly *A. stricta*), is the dominant plant in sandhills, flatwoods, and dry prairies. It is a keystone species because it



Wiregrass prairie

Photo by Bill Bissett

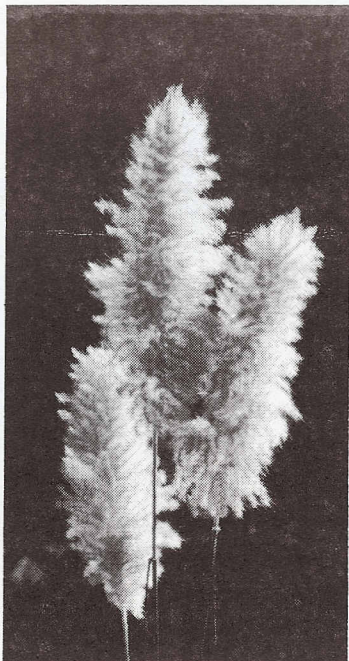
"Anyone who thinks wiregrass is a lackluster grass hasn't seen Audubon's Kissimmee Prairie in the fall after a summer fire."

carries the wildfires that keep these ecosystems thriving.

Wiregrass stands erect when young or just burned and then spreads out to a dome or donut shape that is about two feet across. The thin, wiry dark green leaves have tufts of hairs at their bases, helping to distinguish wiregrass from several other grasses with rolled blades. If it is burned in late spring or early summer, wiregrass will flower on two to four foot golden stems in the fall. Wiregrass seed can also be sown in early winter and bloom the following fall.

Our showiest grass is giant-plumegrass, *Erianthus giganteus*. In the fall, it stands ten feet tall on the edges of our swamps and sways with giant tawny feathery plumes that are about fifteen inches long and six inches wide. The grass clump is about two feet tall and in some Florida plants, the leaves are fuzzy all over. It is found throughout Florida and on the coastal plain from New York to Texas in wet soils. Typical habitats include cypress swamps, marshes, wet flatwoods, lake shores, ditches, and low fields.

Shortspike-bluestem, *Andro-*



Erianthus giganteus

Photo by Bill Bissett

pogon brachystachys, is a very tall, willowy bluestem with arching branches that reach five to six feet in bloom. Through most of the year, the leafy clumps have fans of bright green, stiffly erect leaves about twelve inches tall. Shortspike-bluestem occurs in sandy soils that are moist or seasonally wet, such as flatwoods, savannas, and upper pond margins, and is especially striking in the sand sinks that are found in the scrub. Though usually occurring as individual well-spaced specimens interspersed

with other grasses and wildflowers, shortspike-bluestem also occurs as the sole groundcover in some areas sloping to wetter soils. It does not, however, easily invade disturbed sites as some other bluestems do. Shortspike-bluestem occurs in all of north Florida except for the western part of the Panhandle, all of central Florida, and parts of south Florida.

It doesn't bear showy plumes, but great damegrass, *Dicanthelium commutatum*, does offer a rich, bright green groundcover for shade. It does not lose its leaves or turn brown in cold winters. We have observed it remaining green into the lower 20 °F. Great damegrass is a bunchgrass, but has several leaves along each stem. The leaves are a very brilliant green, about four inches long and 3/4 inch wide. The stems tend to recline so that the overall height is usually about eight inches. Great damegrass ranges throughout most of the eastern U.S., including all of Florida. It grows well in shade or sun, though usually found in the rich soils of shady hammocks. ☀

In a future issue of The Palmetto, Nancy will write about a 16-acre restoration project involving direct seeding of wiregrass.

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12 Native Grasses

Wiregrass

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