

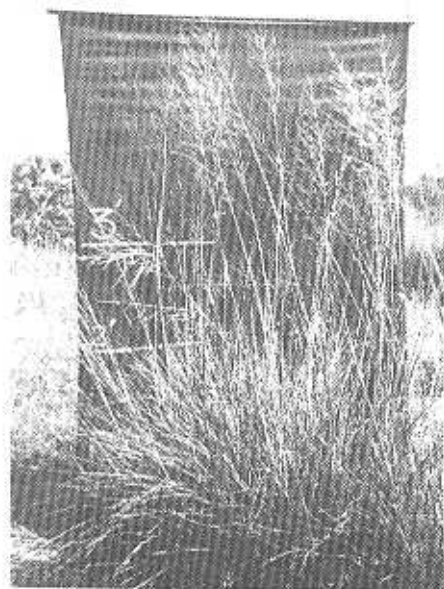
CUTTHROAT GRASS, A Unique Native Grass

by Lewis L. Yarlett

"I feel that this grass has all the requirements to be on the endangered or threatened list." L. Yarlett.

Well over 300 grass species are native to Florida. Some are very common, easily identified, and rather well known. Others pose problems for exact identification, while still others may be rather scarce.

A species that is perhaps well known locally despite its limited distribution and because of its specific site requirements is Cutthroat grass. Many Florida ranchers have never seen the grass but recall hearing about it many times.



Cutthroat grass in sod row at Plant Material Center, Soil Cons. Serv. photo by Yarlett.

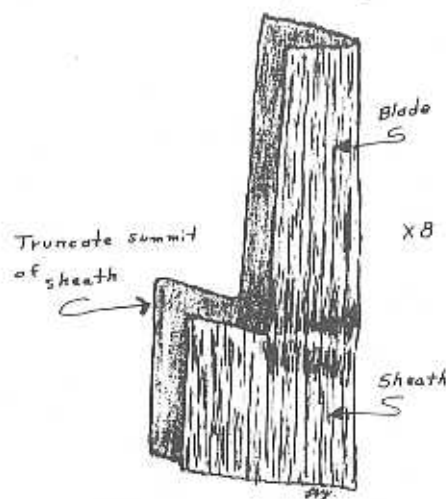
Botanically, cutthroat grass is known as *Panicum abscissum* Swallen. Its most unique feature is its distribution. So far as is known, its only occurrence in the world is in Highlands county and the southern section of Polk County. One small isolated patch was located by the author in Hendry County in the early sixties. The reason for this remains a mystery.

Cutthroat grass is a perennial, often growing in pure stands. Growth is from a robust tuft and spreads primarily by strong, thick rhizomes. The blades are narrow, 16 to 18 inches long, stiff, and slightly twisted. Seed are produced usually in May or June, sometimes in late summer or early fall.

The inflorescence is an open panicle, bronze or slightly purplish, 8 to 10 inches long.

Cutthroat grass was first collected in 1917 near a settlement then known as Florinda, the site of a sawmill and turpentine still. This now extinct settlement was located near the present Indian Lake Estates. Four collections in the University of Florida Herbarium, dated 1925, 1934, 1945, and 1950, all came from Highland County. It was not until 1950 that it was included in the revised and authoritative book, "Manual of the Grasses of the United States".

The origin of the common name is obscure and doubtful, but interesting. It may come from the sharp cutback or indenture at the junction of the flattened sheath and lower part of the grass blade, a good identifying characteristic. But the legend which probably dates back to the early history of the



Drawing by Yarlett showing cutback at juncture of sheath and grass blade.

Florida cattle industry has it that cattlemen would be "cutting their own throats" if they permitted their stock to graze on the grass for a prolonged period of time. This, of course, was prior to the current knowledge and use of mineral mixes and protein supplements for cattle.

An exacting soil-moisture relationship appears to limit the distribution of cutthroat grass. Its present range is specifically limited to the "seepy slopes" on the east and west slopes of the Florida ridge in the two counties where it is found. These soils, plus smaller areas within the ridge, receive additional moisture from the higher lands above and have often been

referred to as "cutthroat land". These are deep, dark-colored, fertile soils, many of which have been cleared and planted to improved pasture grass.

Cutthroat grass, when given proper range management, is a good, highly productive, native forage grass. Because of its limited distribution and the advancement of cultivating practices and urbanization, cutthroat could well become a threatened or endangered species. Fortunately, however, this unique species of native grass has permanent protection at the Highlands Hammock State Park in Sebring.

Hitchcock, A.S. 1950. Manual of the Grasses of the United States, 2nd. ed. revised by Agnes Chase. U.S. Dept. Agr. Misc. Pub. 200. 1051 pp. illus.

Silvén, W.A. 1942. Panicum and Paspalum of the United States, classification and descriptions. W.A. Silvén, San Antonio, Texas. 526 pp. illus. (out of print).

Dear Editor:

I made a goof on the grass article in the last issue! I called seaots *Chasmanthia paniculata* when it should have been *Uniola paniculata*. The newer classifications have changed the inland species to *Chasmanthia* and retained the coastal species (seaots) as *Uniola*.

Lewis L. Yarlett

TREE SEEDLINGS

Are you aware that native trees may be ordered through the Florida State Division of Forestry? The varieties are limited and the trees are tiny seedlings and bare-rooted, but they are cheap. They must be ordered in advance. Order forms and a brochure, "How to Order Bare-Root Seedlings", are available through your County Forester.

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