

Western Wheatgrass

(Agropyron smithii)



Where does it grow? Western wheatgrass is a native grass which grows in a wide range of soil types. It is tolerant of alkali and is found on heavy clay as well as sandy soils. It grows best in swales and lowlands but is also found elsewhere. Western wheatgrass is widely distributed throughout the western United States and Canada. It reaches its greatest importance in the northern Great Plains where it is often the dominant species. The Cascade Mountains are the western boundary of its range. In Oregon it is usually found growing with big sagebrush.

Is it important? Because it cures well and remains nutritious, it is of moderate value as a range grass. In the early spring it may be used extensively by deer and elk. Sheep are especially fond of the seedheads. It may be cut for hay where it is found in pure stands.

What does it look like? Western wheatgrass is a coarse perennial 1 to 2½ feet tall. It has numerous rhizomes so it forms open stands of single stemmed plants rather than bunches. On good sites it may form a sod. The leaves are bluish, erect, rigid, pointed and usually rolled except during early growth. They feel

rough and can even cut fingers. The spikelets are not awned but both the lemmas and glumes are sharp pointed and rigid. The glumes are relatively broad and have several veins. The spikelets usually occur only one per node but occasionally paired spikelets may occur.



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Description:

Length of Life--Long-lived perennial.

Height--1 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet.

Bunch or sod--Sod.

Growth Period--Early spring.

How does it spread?--Seed and rhizomes.

Shape of leaves--Rolled, narrow, sharp pointed and minutely saw-toothed.

Location of leaves--Mostly along the stem, few basal leaves.

Other names--Bluestem wheatgrass.

How to use it. Western wheatgrass can be safely grazed season long if grazing is deferred until the leaves get 4-6 inches high. If used for early spring grazing, it should be rested for the remainder of the growing season. It will withstand grazing well but production is lowered considerably by continued heavy use.

Does it look like anything else? Yes. Western wheatgrass is often confused with beardless wildrye. It can be distinguished by its habit of having only an occasional double spikelet while beardless wildrye usually has all but the lower and upper spikelets double. Beardless wildrye is generally more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet tall and lacks the saw-toothed leaf edge of western wheatgrass. The glumes of western wheatgrass are relatively broad and have several veins while those of beardless wildrye have only a single vein.

