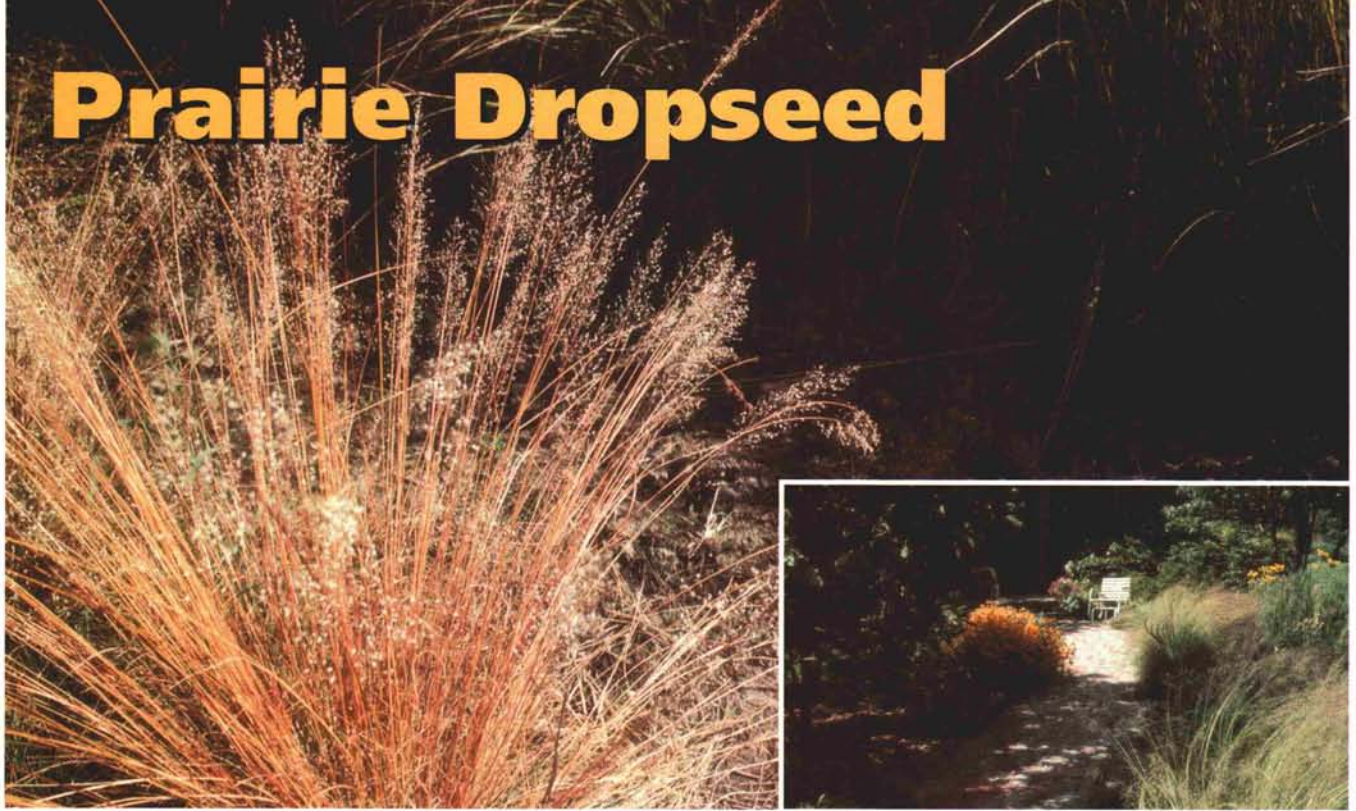


Prairie Dropseed



When viewed up close prairie dropseed offers a pleasing aroma and appearance to the autumn landscape.

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If you are tempted to try your hand at growing some of our native Midwestern prairie plant species, but have concerns about where to begin, I have a great plant for you to try. It is one of the most attractive of the prairie natives and fits equally well into naturalized or managed settings, it's not invasive by seeds or stems, and it's tolerant of a wide variety of soil conditions. What is this delight? It's prairie dropseed, *Sporobolus heterolepis*, also known as northern dropseed or dropseed. It is a warm season perennial clump-forming grass. It naturally grew throughout northeastern Illinois in a variety of settings.

Appearance

The most obvious reason for growing this plant is its refined appearance. It is usually less than 4 feet tall, including inflorescences; and its long, arching foliage resembles a fountain. The 20-inch long leaves emerge from

clumps that are 6 to 8 inches across at the base. The gray-green leaves are rolled inward and become golden brown to orange during the autumn. During winter they turn pale and bleached.

The flowers emerge, usually in August, on sturdy stems. These panicles are cone-shaped, 3 to 12 inches long, and 3 inches wide at the base. Initially a pale pink-brown, they mature to golden brown.

Landscape Use

Prairie dropseed can be used in a variety of golf course settings. Certainly, it is a worthwhile inclusion in naturalized areas. Try to use it where it can be easily viewed by golfers; I have seen it nicely used within a turnaround of a cart path. It is also refined enough to be used in managed landscape settings as a large-scale ground cover, specimen plant, or mixed into a flower bed as an accent. It shows up well when planted in front of a dark background due to its attractive golden appearance in late summer and autumn.

Environmental Adaptation

Prairie dropseed performs best in full sun; it tends to flop over in shaded areas. When established, it is quite heat and drought tolerant, perhaps due to its 3- to 5-foot deep root system. Although it tolerates a wide range of settings, from moist to dry prairies, its preferred growing sites are often well-drained upland areas. In these upland settings, it can form communities where it makes up the majority of the plant composition. Overall, it is generally a trouble-free plant after it has matured and becomes established.

Growing and Propagation

Prairie dropseed tends to begin growing earlier in the spring than many other warm season grasses, but the foliage also stops growing earlier in the summer than other similar species. It seems to do best when transplanted in the spring. Also, it can be slow to mature, sometimes taking up to 4 years to attain full size from seed.

Propagation is by division or seed. Divide plants in spring for



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best success. The seeds of prairie dropseed fall upon ripening, usually in September or October. If you wish to collect seeds from this plant, be sure to monitor their status in the autumn so as not to lose them before they disperse.

There are some differences in opinion about starting prairie dropseed from seed. Some authors report it to be easy to start from seed, while others indicate it to be difficult. In my experience, I have found it to be a difficult plant to start from seed, either in a controlled nursery bed setting or in a landscape setting. I recommend purchasing potted plants or plugs, at least for plantings of limited size. If you do wish to try to seed this plant, sow the seeds in the fall so that they receive stratification.

Of Interest

There is a fragrance, aroma, or odor that emanates from this plant while it's flowering. Some say it smells of hot wax, while oth-

ers liken the aroma to burnt popcorn. Still others find it reminds them of crushed cilantro. Of additional interest is the report that the seeds are tasty. Moreover, the seeds were used to make flour in bygone times. In the wild, prairie

dropseed is good indicator of undisturbed prairie as it does not tolerate grazing or other soil disturbances. ■

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