

## SALTGRASS

### *Distichlis spicata* (L.) Greene

Plant Symbol = DISP

Contributed by: USDA NRCS East Texas Plant  
Material Center



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#### Alternate Names

spikegrass, common saltgrass, inland saltgrass,  
seashore saltgrass, alkali saltgrass,

#### Uses

**Landscaping and Wildlife:** *Distichlis spicata* is an abundant grass found throughout the coastal wetlands along the Gulf of Mexico. It has been used successfully in coastal wetland restoration projects as a pioneering species. It is also valuable for the reclamation of inland, high salinity areas, such as salt water spills associated with oil production sites.

Ducks have been known to feed on the seed, and geese will graze it in the fall, especially if it has been recently burned. It is also an important food source for the larvae of the Wandering Skipper Butterfly and the Florida Salt Marsh Vole.

**Forage:** Saltgrass is grazed by livestock, though it is not as favorable as other species. It is best used in early spring and winter months when other grasses are dry and less palatable. It is most palatable in its early growth stages.

**Ethnobotanical:** It is reported that Native Americans collected the salts extruded from the leaves of this plant, and used them to flavor foods. Saltgrass is also

used in modern pharmaceuticals to treat respiratory allergies.

#### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

#### Description and Adaptation

Saltgrass is a low growing, rhizomatous, sometimes stoloniferous, warm season, perennial grass. The leaves are short, paired, sharply pointed, and erect giving this grass a spiky appearance. The leaf sheaths overlap tightly on the stem, adding to the scaly appearance associated with the rhizomes. Saltgrass will grow from 6 to 18 inches in height, and produces both male and female plants. New plants often produce a star like pattern on bare ground as rhizomes radiate away from the mother plant. Saltgrass is capable of creating dense stands under favorable conditions. It generally produces few seed heads compared to the number of stems, and the seed heads are typically pale green in color. Salt crystals are usually present on the leaf blades in highly saline areas.

Saltgrass is commonly found in the salt marshes and flats along the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf coast; however, various subspecies are distributed much further inland, and may be found in nearly every state. It is very tolerant of saline and droughty conditions and favors fine to medium textured soil. It will tolerate a pH range between 6.4 and 10.5, and requires full sun for optimum growth. Prolonged water inundation will kill this species; however, it will tolerate brief flooding. It commonly grows in areas where water levels fluctuate between 2 inches above and 6 inches below soil level.

#### Establishment

Saltgrass may be established from seed; however, germination percentages can be low. It is most commonly propagated by vegetative means. Containerized material and rhizomes will grow readily, and are more reliable than direct seeding. This is especially true if the area of interest receives tidal influence. Rhizomes may be easily pulled from sandy areas, and cut into short lengths. It is imperative that this material be kept moist and away from excessive heat to maintain viability. Each length of rhizome should contain at least 2 nodes to insure production and establishment. Nodes are

Plant Materials <<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/>>

Plant Fact Sheet/Guide Coordination Page <<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/pfs.html>>

National Plant Data Center <<http://npdc.usda.gov>>

swollen areas on the rhizome, and may be located by following the above ground stems back to the rhizome. Once planted, these short lengths of rhizome will appear to die back. However, with continued watering and care, new shoots will appear from the nodes and stems in about 10 days. Rhizomes may be planted directly to the location of interest or into containers at a depth of 1 to 2 inches for later use.

### **Management**

Saltgrass responds favorably to burning. Burnings should be done once every 2 years between the months of September and February. For best results, burn when water levels are one inch above the soil surface level to avoid damaging the rhizomes and stolons. Grazing should not be allowed on newly burned areas until at least four inches of re-growth appears. Saltgrass will respond to fertilization; however, it is rarely needed in reclamation plantings to be successful.

### **Pests and Potential Problems**

Saltgrass is an alternate host for Red Rust.

### **Environmental Concerns**

*Weediness:* Saltgrass protects itself from over-grazing by growing low to the ground, and may become aggressive in inland areas where more desirable species are grazed too heavily. Please consult with your local NRCS Field Office, Cooperative Extension Service office, state natural resource, or state agriculture department regarding its status and use. Weed information is also available from the PLANTS Web site at [plants.usda.gov](http://plants.usda.gov). Please consult the Related Web Sites on the Plant Profile for this species for further information.

### **Control**

Please contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county weed specialist to learn what works best in your area and how to use it safely. Always read label and safety instructions for each control method. Trade names and control measures appear in this document only to provide specific information. USDA NRCS does not guarantee or warranty the products and control methods named, and other products may be equally effective

### **Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

LK517f saltgrass is a source identified release of saltgrass from the Lockford, California Plant Materials Center.

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

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