

BLUEBUNCH WHEATGRASS

Pseudoroegneria spicata
(Pursh) A. Love
Plant Symbol = PSSP6

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Idaho State Office



USDA NRCS Aberdeen Plant Materials Center
Aberdeen, Idaho

Uses

Grazing/rangeland/wildlife: Bluebunch wheatgrass is palatable to all classes of livestock and wildlife. It is a preferred feed for cattle, horses, sheep, elk, deer and antelope at various times during the year. In spring the protein levels can be as high as 20 percent and decrease to about 4 percent protein as the grass matures. Digestible carbohydrates remain about 45 percent throughout the active growth period.

Erosion control/reclamation: Bluebunch wheatgrass is very drought resistant, stands are persistent, and it is adapted to stabilization of disturbed soils. It is very compatible with slower developing natives such as thickspike and western wheatgrasses, and needlegrass species. It does not compete well with aggressive introduced grasses. Its drought tolerance, extensive root systems, and good seedling vigor make this species ideal for reclamation in areas receiving 10 to 20 inches annual precipitation. This grass can be used in urban areas where irrigation water is limited and to stabilize ditchbanks, dikes, and roadsides as a mix component.

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

Bluebunch wheatgrass *Pseudoroegneria spicata* (Pursh) A. Love (formerly *Agropyron spicatum*) is a perennial bunchgrass common to the northern Great Plains and the Intermountain regions of the western United States. It is a long-lived cool season native grass with an extensive root system with strong tillers. Bluebunch wheatgrass spreads by seed, except in high rainfall zones where some short rhizomes may occur.

Bluebunch wheatgrass is highly variable and grows to 1.5 to 4 feet tall and seed spikes are 3 to 8 inches long. The auricles (ear-shaped appendages where leaf blade and sheath meet) are pointed and semi-clasping to nearly lacking. Leaves are lax, flat to inrolled, 4-6 mm wide and green to blue in color. Leaf sheaths are generally smooth and hairless. Reproductive stems are erect, slender, sometimes wiry with a wavy floral stalk. Seeds have a bristle or awn, except on the beardless type where the awn is lacking.

Adaptation and Distribution

Bluebunch wheatgrass does best on medium to coarse textured soils and can be found on heavy to medium to coarse textured soils over 10 inches deep including fairly sandy sites. It can be seeded on clayey sites. It can be found on thin, rocky sites and on very steep slopes. It will tolerate weakly saline conditions. It cannot grow on very acidic sites. It is cold tolerant, is moderately shade tolerant, and very tolerant of fire. It is intolerant of high water tables, poor drainage, and periods of extended inundation.

On native sites bluebunch wheatgrass is most abundant in the 8 to 20 inch annual precipitation zones. Seeded varieties do best with 12 to 20 inches of precipitation and will tolerate up to 35 inches on very well drained soils. The elevation range is from 500 feet above sea level to 10,000 feet. It is a major component of many native plant communities and generally occupies 20 to 60 percent of the overall composition by weight.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Establishment

This species should be seeded with a drill at a depth of 1/2 inch or less on medium textured soils, 1/4 inch on fine textured soils and 3/4 inch or less on coarse textured soils. Single species seeding rates recommended for this grass are 6 to 8 pounds Pure Live Seed (PLS) or 19 to 25 PLS per square foot. If used as a component of a mix, adjust to percent of mix desired. For mined lands and other harsh critical areas, the seeding rate should be increased to 40 to 50 PLS per square foot. Seedlings are weaker than crested wheatgrass and a clean firm weed free seedbed is required for establishment (cheatgrass competition can cause stand failure).

Seed in very early spring on heavy to medium textured soils and in late fall on medium to light textured soils. Late summer (August - mid September) seeding is not recommended unless irrigation is available. Dormant fall seedings will prechill seed and reduce seed dormancy.

Bluebunch wheatgrass establishes fairly quickly for a native grass and stands should be given 3 years to ensure establishment. It is compatible with other species and should be used in seeding mixtures. It should not be seeded with strongly competitive introduced species.

Stands may require weed control measures during establishment. Application of 2,4-D should not be made until plants have reached the four to six leaf stage. Mow weeds at or prior to their bloom stage. New stands may also be damaged by grasshoppers and other insects and pesticides may be needed.

Management

Stands should not be grazed until they have firmly established (usually two growing seasons) and started to flower. Six inches of new growth should be attained in spring before grazing is allowed in established stands. The growing tip of bluebunch wheatgrass is fairly high and stands can easily be overgrazed. Spring grazing should occur no more than one out of three years and no more than 40 percent utilization should occur during rapid growth. Heavy early spring grazing is especially damaging and grazing should be delayed until flowers are halfway emerging from the protecting leaf. No more than 60 percent utilization should occur after seed ripens.

Bluebunch wheatgrass can be used for hay production and will make nutritious feed, but is more suited to pasture/rangeland use.

Environmental Concerns

Bluebunch wheatgrass is long-lived, spreads primarily via seed distribution, but can spread vegetatively in precipitation zones above 18 inches annual rainfall. It is not considered "weedy" or invasive, but can spread into adjoining vegetative communities under ideal climatic and environmental conditions. Most seedings do not spread from original plantings. It is a cross pollinating species and is known to cross with other ecotypes of bluebunch wheatgrass, quackgrass, thickspike wheatgrass and bottlebrush squirreltail. These crosses broaden the gene pool and do not generally dominate a site or crowd out the native ecotypes and in many cases are sterile.

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

'Goldar' (*P. spicata* ssp. *spicata*) (WA) was released by Idaho-Utah AES, ARS and the Aberdeen, ID Plant Materials Center in 1989 for rangeland re-establishment of native plant communities, vegetative firebreaks, critical area stabilization, and reclamation purposes. Certified seed is available and breeder seed is maintained by Aberdeen PMC.

'Whitmar' (*P. spicata* ssp. *inermis*) (WA) beardless wheatgrass is the awnless form of bluebunch wheatgrass and was released in 1946 by Idaho-Oregon-Washington AES and Aberdeen, ID-Corvallis, OR-Pullman, WA Plant Materials Centers for rangeland re-establishment of native plant communities and reclamation. Certified seed is available and breeder seed is maintained by Pullman PMC.

Foundation and registered seed is available through the appropriate state Crop Improvement Association or commercial sources to grow certified seed.

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