

Changes in Native Grasses 1987 to 2024

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In January 1990 at the Minnesota Nursery and Landscape Association's (MNLA) annual convention in Minneapolis, I first presented a list of winter hardy ornamental grasses recommended for growing and selling in the cold climate of then USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 4a. This list included only 2 native grasses: *Deschampsia caespitosa*, tufted hairgrass, and *Panicum virgatum* 'Rehbraum', 'Rotstrahlbusch', switchgrass.

Other recommended grasses were:

Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Karl Forester'

Helictotrichon sempervirens

Molinia caerulea spp. *arundinaceae* 'Windspiel', 'Skyracer'

Miscanthus sinensis 'Purpurascens', 'Sliberfeder',

Miscanthus xgiganteus

Spodiopogon sibiricus

Fast forward to December 2000 to a new list of recommended grasses for cold climates which included 4 additional native grasses:

Carex muskingumensis

Schizachyrium scoparium

Sporobolus heterolepis

Sorghastrum nutans 'Sioux Blue'

along with:

Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Overdam'

Calamagrostis brachytricha

Molinia caerulea 'Variegata'

Miscanthus 'Variegatus' and 8 other cultivars

Miscanthus oligostachyus

Note that only 3 cultivars were listed for any of these native grasses: 2 for switchgrass and 1 for *Sorghastrum* or yellow prairie grass. Now in 2024, there are big changes in what is available for native grasses and [the hardiness zone](#) for central Minnesota! The Twin Cities metropolitan area and suburbs are now zone 5a along with much of southern Minnesota. The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, 25 miles west of the cities, is still zone 4b. The only little bluestem with named selections in 1990 were the Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) seed mixes that were developed for forage and soil conservation, such as Camper, Aldos, and Blaze; these were not ornamental or landscape selections. In 2000, 'The Blues' was the only ornamental cultivar of little bluestem available. Now in 2024, there are at least 16 named ornamental cultivars of little bluestem!! And perhaps more when you read this article.

Panicum virgatum, switchgrass, is even more diverse. It was first selected as an ornamental in Europe, thus the German cultivars recommended in 1990. [Kurt Bluemel, Inc.](#) was selling 4 switchgrass cultivars in 1987, and today this wholesale grass grower lists 11. At the Minnesota

Landscape Arboretum Grass Collection, we trialed 17 different switchgrasses in the [2012-2015 national grass trials](#). Since 1987 when the Arboretum's Grass Collection was planted, we have trialed 31 different switchgrass cultivars!

There were no *Andropogon gerardii*, big bluestem, cultivars trialed in 1990 or 2000, but since 2011, we have trialed 12 different cultivars. The changes in the native grass selections that are available today shows the demand for native plants with low maintenance requirements that benefit the environment. In recent talks when I am asked to make a list of recommendations, the lists are more and more dominated by native grasses. What is my favorite cultivars of these species? Depends on many things! 'Northwind' switchgrass is straight as an arrow, but 'Shenandoah' is a lovely red. 'Little Luke' little bluestem is a open pumpkin orange, while Blue Heaven® is burgundy red throughout much of the fall and winter. Just like the numerous cultivars of hosta or sedum, these cultivars are different and beautiful. It's hard to pick a favorite!

Grasses recommended in 2021 for MNLA; native grasses in **bold**:

- *Carex elata* 'Aurea', Bowles' Golden Sedge, European origin
- *Carex montana*, European origin
- ***Carex grayi* Gray's or mace sedge Central U.S. native**
- *Hakonechloa macra* Japanese forest grass
- *Molinia caerulea* subspecies *arundinacea* 'Cordoba', 'Skyracer', 'Karl Forester' purple moorgrass, European origin
- ***Schizachyrium scoparium*, little bluestem Blue Heaven®, 'Blue Paradise', 'Little Luke', 'Smoke Signal'**
- *Sesleria caerulea*; *Sesleria* 'Greenlee's Hybrid' moorgrass, European origin
- *Spodiopogon sibericus* frost grass, Europe, and Asia origin
- ***Sporobolus heterolepis* 'Tara'; 'Morning Mist' Midwest native PP***
- ***Sorghastrum nutans* Golden Sunset® Midwest native, U of M introduction**

Grasses recommended for MNLA 2019, native grasses in **bold**:

- ***Andropogon gerardii* 'Blackhawks' Illinois native selection PP***
 - ***Carex pensylvanica* Pennsylvania sedge Midwest and Eastern US native**
 - ***Carex muskingumensis* palm sedge Midwest and Eastern US native**
 - *Hakonechloa macra* hakone grass Japanese origin
 - *Molinia caerulea* subspecies *arundinacea* 'Skyracer' European origin
 - ***Panicum virgatum* 'Cape Breeze' MA native selection PP**
 - ***Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' Wisconsin native selection**
 - ***Schizachyrium scoparium* Blue Heaven® Minnesota native selection, PP**
 - ***Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Blue Paradise' Walter's Gardens, MI breeding PP**
 - ***Sporobolus heterolepis* 'Morning Mist' Wisconsin native selection PP**
- *PP= Plant Patent

