

SOUTH DAKOTA'S

Grasses, Wildflowers & Crops



GRASSES

Big Bluestem

It's not uncommon for big bluestem to grow six feet high and higher in both tallgrass and mixed-grass prairies. The seed heads appear in July or August, with three connected branches forming a distinctive "turkey foot" pattern. Big bluestem varies in color from steel blue to bronze early and shades of red, brown and purple later in the season.



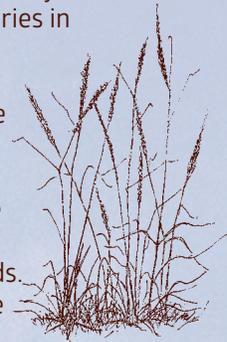
Buffalo-grass

Drought resistant and widespread in short-grass prairies, buffalo-grass forms a gray-green mat seldom more than five inches tall. Its male and female plants grow separately, with the taller male plants characterized by little comb-like pollen producers. The female plants are shorter and conceal hard seed burs near the ground at the base of the leaves.



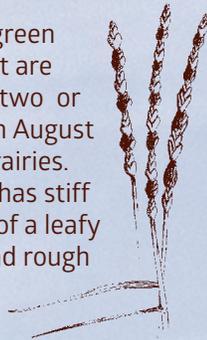
Green Needlegrass

Green needlegrass grows extensively in South Dakota's mixed-grass prairies in June and July. As the season progresses, the plant turns from green to gray-green to pale yellow. The slender stems stand two to three feet tall and have narrow, rolled leaves. Threadlike awns about an inch long radiate out from seeds at the plant heads. Changes in humidity cause these awns to curl and uncurl.



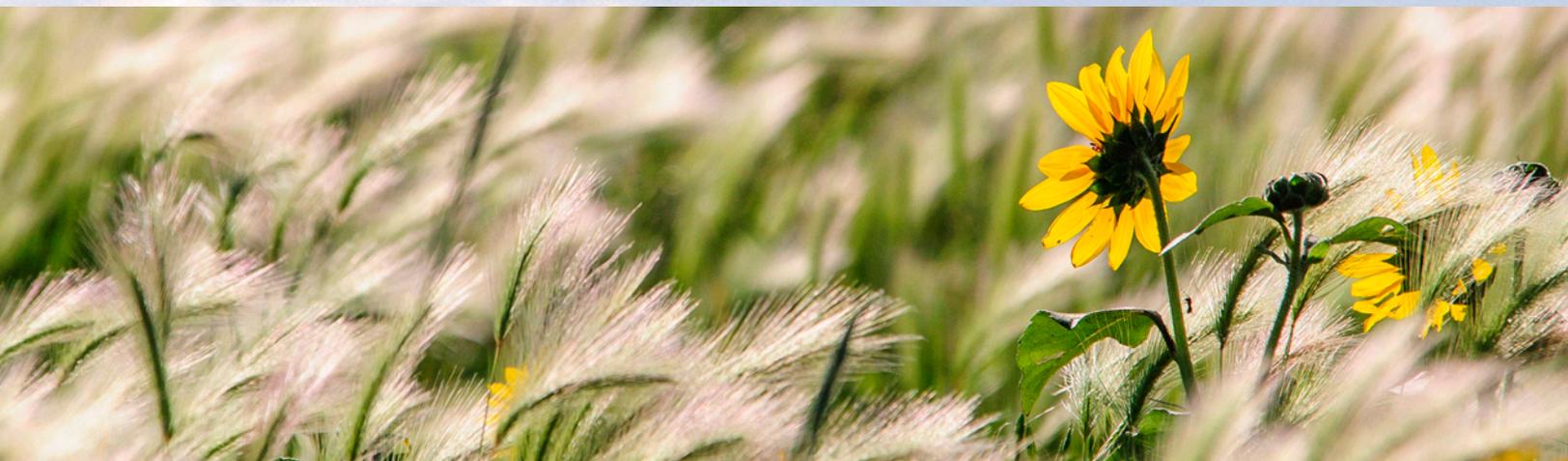
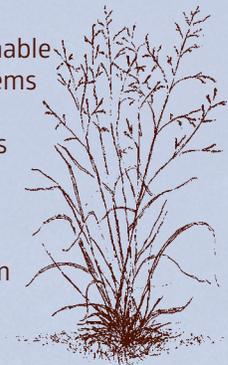
Western Wheatgrass

Western wheatgrass has a blue-green cast, especially when patches of it are viewed from a distance. It grows two or more feet high from June through August and is common to mixed-grass prairies. Like wheat, western wheatgrass has stiff spiked flower clusters at the top of a leafy stem. The leaves are furrowed and rough to the touch.



Switchgrass

Switchgrass grows in bunches in tallgrass prairies and is distinguishable by its two to four foot tall leafy stems and large, branched seed heads almost as wide as they are high. Its leaves also have a characteristic V-shaped patch of "hair" on their upper surfaces. From July through September, switchgrass turns from purple to tan.



WILDFLOWERS

Pasque Flower

The pasque is South Dakota's state flower and is one of the first to bloom on the prairie each spring. A member of the buttercup family, it grows six to sixteen inches high, varies in color from light blue or deep lavender to white, has a gold center, and appears throughout the state in April and May. The leaves of the pasque emerge after the flowers and grow from the base of the plant.



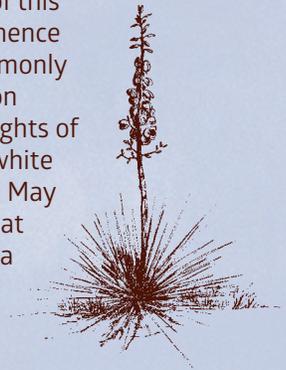
Plains Pricklypear

The pricklypear cactus has flat, jointed stems and whitish spines about an inch long. It can grow up to a foot high and spread in clumps several feet across, typically on dry buttes and mesas. The large, waxy flowers of the pricklypear are pale yellow with reddish centers and bloom from mid-June through July. Early settlers made jams from pulpy, red pricklypear fruits.



Small Soapweed

Plains Indians used the roots of this striking plant to make soap – hence the name – but it is more commonly called Yucca. It grows mostly on exposed hillsides, reaching heights of two to four feet. The creamy-white flowers of the yucca are borne May through July on a rigid stalk that rises as high as four feet from a rosette of sword-like leaves.



Segolily

The segolily dots hillsides and dry, open areas throughout western South Dakota in late May and June. Its wiry stem is usually about a foot long and supports a creamy-white flower with touches of magenta in the center. Segolily leaves are narrow and grasslike and roll inward. The entire flower grows from a small bulb that Plains Indians once used for food.



Tufted Evening-primrose

The tufted evening-primrose favors dry buttes and clay banks, earning it the nickname "gumbo lily." Its large white flowers are two to four inches wide and grow above a rosette of leaves spread over the ground. From May through August, the petals of the gumbo lily open after sunset, then turn from pink to deep rose before wilting by the following noon.



CROPS

Alfalfa

Alfalfa is a member of the pea family, bearing seed pods filled with four to eight seeds. The plant's many slender stems grow about three feet high from a short, woody crown. Alfalfa leaves are compound, each consisting of three leaflets, and alfalfa flowers (usually purple) grow in clusters of five to fifty. South Dakota farmers harvest alfalfa as hay.



Corn

Corn is primarily grown in eastern South Dakota where it can be irrigated and rainfall is higher. The corn plant is part of the grass family and features a straight, solid stem and long, narrow leaves that grow alternately. Corn grows seven to ten feet tall and is commonly used as livestock meal, for human consumption and ethanol fuel production.



Flaxseed

Flaxseeds contain linseed oil, an extract used in paints, varnishes, linoleum and oilcloth. After the linseed oil is pressed out, the remaining flaxseeds are made into a livestock meal. Flax plants are one to four feet tall with small blue or white flowers. In 2013, South Dakota was the nation's third largest producer of flaxseed.



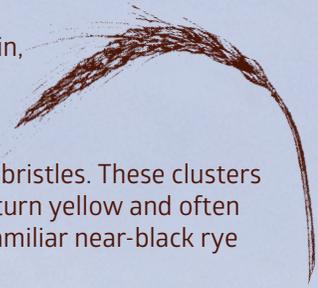
Oats

In 2013, South Dakota was first in the nation in the production of oats, the most valuable of horse feeds. The two to four foot long oat stalk is slender and topped by thin branches called spikelets that spread out from all sides of the stem. The tan-to-white oat grain grows at the end of these spikelets.



Rye

Rye, another cereal grain, is primarily used as livestock feed. The rye plant has long, slender seed clusters with long bristles. These clusters are green at first, then turn yellow and often droop when ripe. The familiar near-black rye grains grow in pairs.



Soybeans

Like flaxseeds, soybeans are processed for oil (mostly for use in margarine, shortening and cooking oil), then the beans and bean hulls are made into a protein meal for livestock. The stems, leaves and pods of the two to four foot soybean plant are covered with fine brown or gray hairs. Soybean flowers are white or purple and soybean pods are light yellow to brown or black when ripe.



Sunflowers

South Dakota ranked first in the nation in the production of sunflower seeds in 2013. They are roasted and eaten like peanuts, used to make vegetable oil and fed to poultry and cattle. The flower is three to six inches in diameter with yellow petals that surround a dark brown center where the seeds grow. The rough stem grows three to ten feet tall from June through October.



Wheat

Wheat is a major cash crop for South Dakota farmers, who grow the spring, winter and durum varieties. Spring wheat is planted in March for autumn harvest, while winter wheat is planted in the fall and harvested the following July. When young, wheat looks like grass. As it matures, some varieties reach up to three feet and the clusters of bearded, 1/4-inch kernels turn golden brown.

