

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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For more information, or to join
Wild Ones Natural Landscapers,
here's how to reach us:

Phone

(920) 730-3986
(877) 394-3954 (Toll-Free)

Mail

PO Box 1274
Appleton, WI 54912-1274

E-Mail

ExecDirector@wildones.org

WebSite

www.wildones.org

Celebrating natives
plant and natural
landscapes
since 1979.

Establishing a State Grass

Next Generation

By Kim Lowman Vollmer

My interest in state grasses began in 1998, when I had been a fourth grade teacher for 16 years, a member of Wild Ones for several years, and was growing prairie plants in my yard. I was awarded a \$5,000 grant to establish a prairie garden at my school, Clinton Elementary, in Clinton, Wisconsin. I knew the importance of native plants in the environment, and I knew that kids had to be involved in every level of a project if it were to be a success. So from the beginning, kids were involved in spreading sand and leaves, selecting a plan for paths, planting almost 2,000 plants, building Aldo Leopold style benches, spreading wood chips on the paths, weeding, filling the bird bath, measuring rain, and everything else that needed and still needs doing. The prairie is integrated into the curriculum in many ways and enjoyed during recess.



Last year while using the computer for research, students came upon a site with information about state grasses. They discovered that there were only 14 states that have designated a state grass (see list below). They decided to try to establish a state grass for Wisconsin, hoping that this act would help preserve the prairies by bringing some status to a native grass. Last year's fourth graders researched grasses and contacted the Department of Natural Resources, greenhouses and other experts. They

chose little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*, formerly called *Andropogon scoparius*) because it is native, it grows in a variety of habitats, it survives all kinds of weather – and the name is easy to remember!

The next step was to contact our local state representative. We were informed that a law had to be passed to create a state symbol. This meant that a bill had to be written and presented for approval by the legislative branch and then signed by the governor. My students got busy. They e-mailed and posted letters to the over-400 school districts in Wisconsin to encourage them to write to their state representatives in support. In January, our local representative, Dan Schooff, came to the school and spoke to the fourth graders. He was willing to sponsor the bill to establish little bluestem as Wisconsin's state grass. We were thrilled!

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Our next step is to continue our PR work and to bombard the State Assembly with letters (www.legis.state.wi.us/assemblypages). Our hope is that environmentalists and activists, both kids and adults, will actively support this project. The more signatures on the bill the better chance it has of passing. We have our fingers crossed! This is a wonderful project to do with children to teach them about the legislative process and the value of active participation.

Kim Lowman Vollmer is a member of the Rock River Valley (IL) chapter.

State Grasses

Colorado: blue grama (*Boeteloua gracilis*)
Illinois: big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)
Montana: western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*)
Nebraska: little bluestem (*Andropogon scoparius*)
Nevada: Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*)
New Mexico: blue grama (*Boeteloua gracilis*)
North Dakota: western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*)
Oklahoma: Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)
Oregon: bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*)
South Dakota: western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*)
Texas: sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)
Utah: Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*)
Washington: western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*)
Wyoming: western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*)

Proposed State Grasses

Arizona: sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) and bush muhly (*Muhlenbergia porteri*)
California: purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*)
Idaho: Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*)
Oregon: bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*)