

Native Grasses in Kansas: History, Importance and How to Implement Them

Native grasslands once covered vast expanses of North America, providing habitat that supported more than 800 native species of plants and animals. Native warm season grasses (NWSG) were the dominant component of these prairie grassland ecosystems. Today, less than 10% of the original tallgrass prairie and 30% of shortgrass prairie remains. This loss has directly affected native wildlife.

However, new efforts to restore habitats are helping to educate landowners about the benefits of grasslands. Many people do not realize that warm season grasses can benefit humans and livestock as well as wildlife. The deep root systems of native grasses hold soil in place, reducing erosion and decreasing runoff, which helps keep waterways healthy and recharges ground water. When native grasses die, their roots decay and add significant amounts of organic matter throughout the soil, replenishing fertility.

As conservation practices, native warm season grasses are an ideal component to any landscape, having minimal requirements for supplemental water or fertilizer. Once established, they are drought tolerant and almost completely disease free. Peak growth periods of these mostly perennial bunch grasses are from June-August. Like other native plants, they have co-evolved with the local climate and soils.

Native warm season grasses provide optimum habitat conditions to more native wildlife species than do cool season grasses. They provide three of the basic habitat requirements of grassland wildlife species—food, shelter, and space. The habitat provided by native warm season grass species is preferred by ground-dwelling wildlife such as rabbits, wild turkeys, ring-necked pheasants, northern bobwhites, and a variety of songbirds and small mammals. Mix in some native forbs, and the NWSG stand becomes an ideal habitat for butterflies, bees, and beneficial insects.

For livestock owners, NWSG can provide actively growing forage during June-August after cool season grasses go dormant. Moving cattle and other grazers onto NWSG stands can allow cool season grasses to rest before going into fall production.

Establishing a stand of NWSG can benefit the environment, people, wildlife and livestock while bringing back a little bit of the great North American prairie.

Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian Grass, Switch Grass, Sideoats Grama, Eastern Gamagrass are some of the preferred NWSG for our area. Stands can be established by drilling seed, broadcasting, and even frost seeding properly prepared seedbeds. Once established stands need to be burned or hayed every three years to keep them properly managed.

The best time for seeding NWSG is December 1-May 15th; with around March 15th being optimal. For landowners interested in installing grasses, it is always best to start prepping your land the fall before spring planting. Prepping may include killing cool season grasses with a glyphosate treatment in the fall, then burning and reapplying a treatment of glyphosate and imazapic herbicide the following spring.