

Scribner's Dichanthelium

By Ricky Linex

Wildlife Biologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Once widely known as Scribner's panicum, this is another of many plants that over the year's botanists have chosen to move to another plant genus or even to a brand-new genus in the broad grass family of Poaceae as better identification techniques are found. As I did, you may have once learned this plant in the Panicum genus. I used to blame it on new crops of botanists since it seemed plants would keep a name for nearly 20 years before it would change. But now plant identification has gone past learning to identify by family characteristics and use of dichotomous key with molecular DNA and RNA used to identify cells of plants and place them in the proper plant family, genus and species. Individual seeds or even plant parts found at crime or accident scenes have identified the actual plants using this modern CSI technology. I guess we will have to resign ourselves to learn the new scientific names and quit griping about the change just for the sake of change. However, as we get older it seems easier to gripe than to learn new plant names.

Which brings us back to Scribner's dichanthelium, *Dichanthelium oligosanthos*, this cool-season native perennial bunchgrass begins growth in the fall from a basal rosette and matures to seed in May and June. In favorable moisture conditions some plants may remain green throughout summer and produce a small seed crop in the fall. Plants may range in height from 6 to 18 inches. The stems may or may not have hairs, but if hairs are present, they will be flattened to the stem. Leaves are broad and flat, rounded at the base and sharply pointed at the tip, bunched in rosette fashion and grow $\frac{3}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide and 2 to 5 inches long, ascending up the stem. Leaves may have stiff hairs on the margins and fine, short hairs on the underside. Seed head produced in the spring is an open irregular panicle, 2 to 5 inches in length, with many branchlets and an individual seed at the end of each. Seed head produced in the fall is smaller than the spring version. Seeds are large, hard and slick, making them ideal for birds to consume.

Growing from fall through spring, Scribner's dichanthelium provides palatable and nutritious green forage at a time when it is in short supply. Forage value for livestock is good with production of soft, tender leaves and little stem material. Forage value for deer and antelope is fair. During winter deer and other wildlife will make use of this green, tender vegetation. Seeds are readily eaten by quail, dove, turkey and songbirds. Since it produces seeds in the May-June period, in advance of many other seed producing plants, it is of value for quail and other seed eating birds.

Scribner's dichanthelium will usually be seen growing along the ground, in between other bunchgrasses, and may go unnoticed to the casual observer. It rarely makes up a substantial percentage of the grass community but adds high quality forage during critical winter periods. Proper grazing use along with rotational grazing will keep this native cool-season grass present on your rangeland. This grass is commonly seen on sandy to sandy loam soils but will grow on all soil types except for marshlands. It can tolerate shade much better than other cool-season grasses. It grows in all vegetational regions of Texas, so everyone can be on the lookout for this desirable grass.

I received a text this morning with a photo from a keen-eyed rancher asking, "What's this?" Over the years he has sent many photos of plants he observes and is always eager to learn new plants. This is good for me as well since I get to learn from his observations on what the cattle are eating throughout the seasons as they are rotated through pastures. The grass he sent today? Scribner's dichanthelium. Growing when it should be and providing fresh, green forage for grazing animals. Life is good.

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Photo captions:

1 New growth normally begins in the fall growing until spring but may grow again in the summer if rainfall is above normal.



2 A healthy Scribner's plant prior to seeding out shows the robust growth of the many branches this grass produces.



3 Close up of the panicle showing the single seeds at the ends of the branchlets.



4 The name of rosettegrass comes from the dense radiating cluster of leaves found on this grass.

