

Indiangrass

Sorghastrum nutans (L.) Nash

Plant Symbol = SONU2

Common Names: yellow Indiangrass, Indian reed

Scientific Names: *Sorghastrum avenaceum* (Michx.) Nash

Description

General: Indiangrass is a native, warm season (C4), perennial with short, scaly rhizomes (Stubbendieck 1986). It grows from 3 to 8 feet (1 to 2.5 m) tall (Fig 1.). The culms (seed stalks) are glabrous with hairy nodes. The leaf blades are flat, 10 to 20 inches (25 to 50 cm) long, 0.2 to 0.4 inch (5 to 10 mm) wide and narrowing at the base with sheaths glabrous or sparsely pilose. The fringed ligule is 0.08 to 0.16 inch (2 to 4 mm) long and notched at the tip. The foliage color varies from glaucous blue-green to green. A prominent characteristic of Indiangrass is the dense golden bronze to yellow plume like inflorescence (Fig. 2). The hirsute seeds are 0.2 to 0.3 inch (6 to 8 mm) long with a prominent bent awn 0.4 to 0.6 inch (1 to 1.5 cm) long (Tyrrel et al. 2008, Grelen and Hughes 1984).

Distribution: Indiangrass is found from the east coast to the Rocky Mountains, Arizona, Wyoming, and Utah. For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Habitat: Indiangrass occurs in areas receiving 11 to 45 inches (28 to 114 cm) of annual precipitation (USDA, NRCS 2017). It is best known as part of the tallgrass prairie vegetation in the central United States and grows in association with various grasses including switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), and big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) (Gould 1975). Indiangrass also occurs in bottomlands, savannahs, and the southern pine region of the southeastern U.S. (Grelen and Hughes, 1984).

Adaptation

Indiangrass is adapted to deep, moist soils ranging from heavy clays to sand with a pH range of 4.8 to 8.0. Indiangrass has a medium tolerance to salinity and drought (USDA, NRCS 2017; Schmer et al. 2012). It is adapted to periodic burning and survives by sprouting from underground rhizomes (Walkup 1991).

Uses

Forage: Indiangrass is highly palatable to all classes of livestock and is suitable for both grazing and hay when properly managed (Leithead et al. 1971).

Wildlife: The bunch type growth and basal leaves provide ground cover and nesting areas for gamebirds and songbirds (Ohlenbuseh et al. 1983, George 1978, Robel et al. 1970). White-tailed deer utilize the tall grass for cover throughout most of the year (Pierce and Flinn 2013). Native bees gather nesting materials from this plant. Indiangrass is a larval host and adult food source for the Pepper and Salt Skipper butterfly (*Amblyscirtes hegon*) (Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center 2017).



Fig. 1. Indiangrass ranges in height from 3 to 8 feet.



Fig. 2. Indiangrass seedhead.

Ethnobotany

The Lakota name for Indiangrass means "red grass with fluffy light – colored end" (Johnson and Larson 2007). Native Americans wove Indiangrass into baskets and mats. They would dye the grass and thread it with beads, bark, or quills for ornamentation (Macleod 2017).

Status

Threatened or Endangered: Indiangrass is not listed as threatened or endangered in the US Fish and Wildlife Service Environmental Conservation Online System (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017).

Wetland Indicator: Indiangrass is a facultative upland plant (FACU) throughout the continental United States. It usually occurs in non-wetlands, but may occur in wetlands (US Army Corps of Engineers 2017).

Weedy or Invasive:

This plant may become weedy or invasive in some regions or habitats and may displace desirable vegetation if not properly managed. Please consult with your local NRCS Field Office, Cooperative Extension Service office, state natural resource, or state agriculture department regarding its status and use.

Please consult the PLANTS Web site (<http://plants.usda.gov/>) and your state's Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g., threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Planting Guidelines

Indiangrass seed is planted from mid-winter to late spring depending on planting. Contact your local NRCS Field Office or cooperative extension service for recommended planting dates. The preferred method for planting Indiangrass is using a no-till seed drill equipped with a native grass seed box (Fig. 3). The native grass seed box should contain picker wheels and agitators to mix and stir the fluffy seeds to prevent bridging inside the seed box and drop tubes. Avoid using a seed box without picker wheels or agitators. When possible, plant debearded seed to improve planting efficiency (awns and fluff appendages have been removed from the seed). Seed should be planted ½ inch deep or less at 4.5 to 10 PLS lb/acre depending on location and planting method. Contact your local NRCS field office or cooperative extension service for recommended seeding rate for your area. When included in a mix, adjust the single species seeding rate to achieve the desired percentage of Indiangrass. No-till seedbed preparation includes mowing and broad spectrum herbicide applications to terminate existing vegetation before planting. No-till seedbed preparation and planting minimizes soil disturbance and reduces competition from weedy, warm season annuals.



Fig. 3. No till seed drill planting into a seedbed prepared by mowing and herbicide applications.

A conventional seed drill equipped with a native seed box may be used on a prepared seedbed. Additional herbicide applications may be required on prepared seedbeds prior to planting to reduce competition from weedy summer annuals. A less preferred method for planting Indiangrass is to broadcast the seed on a prepared seedbed. A carrier agent such as sand or granular clay products increase seed flow through spreaders and improve seed distribution. After broadcasting the seed, drag or cultipack the planted area to improve seed-to-soil contact and lightly cover the seed. Increase the seeding rate on problem sites requiring a quicker cover for soil protection.

Management

During the establishment year, use mowing and herbicide applications to control annual grasses and weeds in seedling stands. Mow the seeded stand high leaving 6 to 12 inch grass stubble to remove flowering portions of the weeds and reduce damage to the slower growing native grass seedlings. For herbicide recommendation, consult with your local agricultural cooperative extension service. Avoid fertilization in the first growing season as it increases competition from weedy annuals (Warnes and Newell 1969). Grazing is not recommended during the establishment year. However, light grazing may be useful for removing weed competition as an alternative to mowing or herbicide applications. Consult with the local NRCS field office for guidance on grazing first year growth as a weed control method.

Indiangrass is tolerant to fire. However, Indiangrass responds differently if it is in a monoculture or mixed stand with other grasses and forbs. In a monoculture, prescribed burning in consecutive years is not recommended as it may decrease stand productivity (Cuomo 1996). Prescribed burning of a monoculture stand should be used to address particular issues such as

litter reduction. In a mixed stand, Indiangrass canopy cover increased over time with both spring and summer biennial prescribed burns (Towne and Kemp 2008). For more information and assistance with prescribed burning contact your local USDA NRCS Field Office.

Grazing: Indiangrass is sensitive to overgrazing and will decrease under excessive grazing pressure (Weaver 1968). Begin grazing when the grass is 12 to 18 inches tall (Henning 1993). Do not graze the foliage lower than 8 inches. Use rotational grazing and proper livestock stocking rates to maintain stand productivity. Contact your local USDA NRCS field office for more information on rotational grazing and developing prescribed grazing plans.

Hay production: Indiangrass begins growth in mid spring. In a three-year study in west-central Texas, 'Lometa' Indiangrass remained in a vegetative stage (April to June) longer than most other warm season perennial grass entries (switchgrass, big bluestem, eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*), and sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*). Mean crude protein and digestibility for the cultivar 'Lometa' averaged 11% and 73% at the vegetative stage, 8% and 63% at stem elongation, 7% and 53% at flower/seed set and 5% and 53% after frost (Ziehr et al. 2014). Yield of Indiangrass cultivars in the southern Ozarks ranged from 4511 lb/acre ('Cheyenne') to 5314 lb/acre ('Rumsey') fertilized with 50 lb N/acre in the spring (USDA NRCS 2008). Mitchell and Anderson (2008) recommends applying N fertilizer in split applications before the first and second harvests in the central U.S. Leave an 8-inch stubble height when cutting Indiangrass for hay and limit the number of harvests to one or two cuttings per season as a more intensive harvest schedule may adversely affect stand productivity (Cuomo 1996).

Pests and Potential Problems

Indiangrass may serve as a host plant for leaf spot pathogens of *Colletrichum caudatum* and *Ascochyta brachypodii* (Zeiders 1982 and 1987). *Puccinia virgate*, a rust fungi, was reported on Indiangrass cultivars and ecotypes in east Texas at varying degrees of infestation (Matula and Taylor 2004).

Environmental Concerns

Indiangrass may spread to adjacent areas. It is considered a desirable plant within its range of occurrence. However, Indiangrass may be vulnerable to foliar diseases such as leaf spot or rust.

Control

Indiangrass is controlled by tillage and broad spectrum herbicides. Please contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county extension weed specialist to learn what works best in your area and how to use it safely.

Seeds and Plant Production

Production fields should be fertilized and limed based on soil test recommendations after plants have had at least one growing season to establish. This will minimize competition from warm season weeds during the establishment year.

Indiangrass can be direct seeded using methods previously discussed in this document. For production fields, plant in 36" rows (approximately 3.3 lb/acre) or 26 seeds per linear foot of row (Houseal 2007). Allow enough space between rows for field maintenance and harvesting equipment. Consult with your local agricultural cooperative extension service for assistance with recommendations on herbicides and application rates for controlling weeds in Indiangrass seed production fields.

Indiangrass seed fields reach their peak production at three years and have a productive stand life of 10 to 15 years (Houseal 2007). Indiangrass seed is very susceptible to shattering at maturity. Harvest seed when some of the topmost spikelets have fallen and the middle ones are in hard dough stage. Indiangrass seed can be harvested by a conventional combine or flail harvester. When harvesting with a combine, use low volume air settings and slower cylinder speed (900 to 1100 RPM) to minimize seed loss. Flail harvesters or seed strippers are nondestructive harvest methods that allow multiple harvests of seed production fields. After harvesting, the seed should be air-dried. Drying time varies widely by location and depends on such factors as temperature, humidity, and the amount of residue in harvested seed. Seed yield per acre varies from 50 to 130 bulk lb/acre (Houseal 2007). Scalp the dried material to remove larger stems and chaff, and use a debearder or brush machine to remove awns and other seed appendages (Fig. 4). For the final cleaning process, use an air-screen cleaner to remove additional stems, chaff, and unfilled seed not removed during the initial cleaning process. To maintain seed viability, store seed in a temperature and humidity controlled environment where the sum of percent humidity + temperature (°F) is equal to value of 100.



Fig. 4. Indiangrass seeds. Photo: Steve Hurst, hosted by the USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

Indiangrass may be transplanted in the spring as seedlings where applicable. Transplanting reduces the time needed to achieve a solid stand, allows for use of pre-emergent herbicides, and reduces the amount of weed competition typically seen in fields planted from seed. Transplants may be grown in the greenhouse using standard greenhouse production practices. To start transplants, use seed that has been stored in cool, dry conditions for a year. Sow seed ¼ inch deep into transplant trays two months before the last frost-free date in spring (Houseal 2007). Grow in the greenhouse until transplant seedlings develop a dense, fibrous root plug. Before planting to the seed production field, harden off seedlings in a shade house for approximately two weeks.

Once transplants are beyond the seedling stage, cultivation and selective, post-emergence herbicides are recommended to reduce weed competition and maintain stand integrity. Consult your local extension weed specialist for recommended herbicides. Always read and follow label directions when applying herbicides.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

Cultivars or prevarietal releases and other sources should be selected based on the local climate, resistance to local pests, and intended use. Consult with your local land grant university, local extension or local USDA NRCS office for recommendations on adapted cultivars for use in your area.

‘Americus’ was released in 2002 by the Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center in cooperation with the Alabama Crop Improvement Association. Two collections from Georgia (Terrell and Sumter County) and two collections from Alabama (Barbour and Houston County) were cross-pollinated to produce this synthetic cultivar. It was released for pasture and hay production in the southeastern U.S.

‘Cheyenne’ was selected at the SCS Nursery, Woodward, OK by J.E. Smith, Jr., and G.L. Powers, and informally released in 1945. It is a collection of diverse plants with good forage and seed production qualities. It is recommended for range and pasture plantings in western Oklahoma, and in Texas.

Coastal Germplasm was released in 2007 by the Cape May, New Jersey Plant Materials Center as source identified germplasm. It is a composite of seed collections from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts.

‘Holt’ was selected at the Nebraska AES, Lincoln, and USDA-ARS by E.C. Conard and L.C. Newell, and released in 1960. The original seed was collected in Elkhorn Valley of Holt County in northeastern Nebraska. It is well suited for pasture and range seedings with other warm season grasses.

‘Llano’ was released in 1963 by the Los Lunas, New Mexico Plant Materials Center and New Mexico AES. The seed was collected from sandy sites in eastern New Mexico (near Hudson and Portales) at elevations above 4,000 ft. with an average annual precipitation of 16 inches. It is known for high seed yields under fertilization and irrigation. It is recommended for range seedings, irrigated and non-irrigated pastures and revegetating disturbed sites.

‘Lometa’ was released cooperatively in 1981 by the James E. “Bud” Smith Plant Materials Center, Knox City, Texas, and the Texas AES. The original seed was collected in 1964 near Lometa, Texas. It produces twice the amount of forage as ‘Cheyenne’ and cures well for hay production. It is suited for range and pasture plantings in central and south Texas and for revegetating disturbed sites.

‘Nebraska 54’ was released in 1957 from seed collected from native stands in southern Nebraska by Harold Hummel, a private seed grower. It is recognized for high seed yields and good seedling vigor. It is adapted to southern and eastern Nebraska, and in northern Kansas, for pasture and range seedings.

Newberry Germplasm was released, as source identified germplasm, in 2005 by the U.S. Forest Service in cooperation with the Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center and the South Carolina Native Plant Society. It is a composite of seed collections from Newberry County, South Carolina.

Northern, Central and Southern Iowa Germplasms were cooperatively released in 1997, 1996, 1998, respectively, as source identified releases, by the Elsberry, Missouri Plant Materials Center, University of Northern Iowa, Iowa Department of Transportation, Iowa Crop Improvement Association and NRVC. They are all composite lines from collections made in Northern, Central and Southern Iowa.

Northern and western Missouri Germplasms were released in 1999, as source identified releases, by the Elsberry, Missouri Plant Materials Center, University of Missouri, Missouri Department of Transportation, and Missouri Department of Conservation. They are all composite lines from collections made in northern and western Missouri.

'Osage' was selected at the Kansas AES, USDA-ARS and SCS cooperatively by F.L. Barnett from seed collected in eastern and central Kansas and Oklahoma in 1953. It was selected for leafiness, vigor, rust resistance, and early maturity. Recommended for range and pasture seedings in eastern Kansas, western Missouri, and northeastern Oklahoma.

'Oto' was cooperatively released in 1970 by the Nebraska AES, Lincoln and the USDA-ARS from Seed was collected from natural grasslands of Kansas and Oklahoma in 1953-1954. It is known for its superior establishment and yield under favorable moisture and fertility. It is recommended in mixed stands of warm-season grasses for improved grazing in eastern and southern Nebraska.

Prairie View Indiana Germplasm Indiangrass was cooperatively released in 2001 by the Rose Lake, Michigan Plant Materials Center and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Division of Fish and Wildlife as source identified germplasm. It is a composite of seed collections from northern and central Indiana.

'Rumsey' was released in 1983 by the Elsberry, Missouri Plant Materials Center and the Missouri AES. Seed was collected from a native stand in Jefferson County, Illinois. It flowers 10-20 days later than most Indiangrass cultivars, and maintains forage quality later into the season.

Southlow Michigan Germplasm was released cooperatively in 2001 by the Rose Lake, Michigan Plant Materials Center, Michigan Association of Conservation Districts, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources as source identified germplasm. It is a composite of seed collections from the southern Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

Suther Germplasm was released in 2002 by the Cape May, New Jersey Plant Materials Center as source identified germplasm. It is a composite of seed collections from Cabarrus County, North Carolina.

Tejas was selected at the Texas AES in Renner, Texas, but never formally released as a cultivar. Seed collections originated from Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

'Tomahawk' was cooperatively released by the Bismarck, North Dakota Plant Materials Center, ARS, and the North Dakota and South Dakota AES in 1988. It is a composite of three seed collections from North Dakota (near Ludden and Britton) and South Dakota (near Hecla) known for producing high seed yields and having superior winter hardiness. Recommended for range and pasture plantings, wildlife habitat and surface mine reclamation in the northern Great Plains.

Wynia Germplasm was released in 2017 by the Booneville, Arkansas Plant Materials Center as a selected class of natural germplasm. It is a composite of nine collections chosen from an assembly of 46 collections of Indiangrass originating from native stands in western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. Forage quality estimates of crude protein and digestibility are equal to or higher than 'Americus' and 'Cheyenne'. It is recommended for critical area erosion control, forage production, and conservation cover for wildlife and soil stabilization in the southern Ozarks.

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