

# Native Grasses for Use in Calvert County

UNIVERSITY OF  
MARYLAND  
EXTENSION

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GARDENER 

***Andropogon virginicus* – Broomsedge** - Grows along roadsides and in fields. Height normally 1'-3' but can reach 5' under ideal conditions. Requires full sun but grows in poor soil that ranges from dry to wet. With a root depth that can reach 30", Broomsedge is useful on hillsides and embankments and is drought tolerant. Leaves and stalks turn wheat colored in the fall, giving winter interest in the yard or in naturalized areas.

***Chasmanthium latifolium* – River or Sea Oats, Spanglegrass** – A versatile grass that forms large clumps and grows in shade to full sun (more moisture in sun) and can spread promiscuously in the garden. Good for naturalizing or as groundcover, Spanglegrass can reach 5' tall but is usually 2'-3'. Its roots may reach 30" deep and are tough and will hold hillsides and has performed well in drought. In late summer, arching stems appear above the leaves which carry "spangle-shaped" seed heads and in fall, the entire plant dries to a tawny color—providing excellent winter interest.

***Dichanthelium clandestinum* – Deer Tongue Grass** - Prefers full sun to some shade and grows in a range of soils in dry to wet conditions. Height is usually 2' but a mature clump can reach 5' in ideal conditions. In late summer, the stalks are burdened with seed heads and tend to fall over from the center. Roots are tenacious and provide good holding on banks.

***Panicum virgatum* – Switch Grass** - A highly versatile native grass that grows in a wide range of soils from dry to wet in full sun or a bit of shade. Highly drought tolerant, it can withstand being washed by brackish water and performs well in wet conditions. The pinkish seed heads are held above dark green foliage in late summer. In fall the foliage turns to tan and provides drama in the winter landscape. Height ranges from 3'-5' but the feature that makes Switch Grass so useful in containing erosion and runoff lies in the root system which can reach 9'-10' deep. There are several varieties that have striking differences from the species:

'**Cloud Nine**' is the most compact and tallest Switch Grass with blue-green foliage and a height of 6' plus the bloom panicles reach another foot above. Because of its "tight" growing habit, this is a good choice for containers.

'**Heavy Metal**' has a purple blue color and is stiffly upright. Seed heads are dark burgundy. The name comes from its color but this plant can reach a formidable size and provides a strong accent in the garden. Give it room.

**'Prairie Sky'** has beautiful light blue foliage and stems with red-violet highlights. Height is about 3'-4'. One fault is its habit of flopping. Be prepared to contain it with a wire and place at the back of the garden.

**'Rostrahlbusch'** is a red Switch Grass whose leaves are a deep burgundy red in the summer with deep burgundy seed heads forming in the fall.

**'Shenandoah'** is the short one in the group, reaching about 3' tall. The tan foliage has red highlights and red seed heads appear in fall. Foliage deepens to purple in the winter.

***Schizachyrium scoparium* – Little Bluestem** – grows wild in poor, sandy soil in Calvert County and is highly drought tolerant. With a maximum height of 3'-4' and a root system that will delve 6' deep, it is another choice that is well suited for holding hillsides. It tolerates salt spray and being washed occasionally by brackish water. Blue-green leaves and stems have red-violet highlights and seeds appear reddish. Foliage turns tan in late fall and stays attractive throughout the winter.

***Sorghastrum nutans* – Indian Grass** – Considered by many to be one of our most beautiful grasses, Indian Grass height ranges from 3'-8' and its roots can grow to 9' deep. Suited for dry to moist soil, it grows in the wild on dry slopes, in prairies, and the borders of woods. Native to our area but disappearing from the wild, this grass makes a dramatic statement in the yard. Yellow blooms appear in August and turn brown in the fall. Like most grasses, the foliage turns a nice tan for winter.

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This is a short list of the many grasses that grow wild in Southern Maryland. They have been selected for this list because of their drought tolerance and their characteristics that make them good selections for controlling erosion on hillsides.

Compiled by Calvert County Master Gardeners

Source: [Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping – Chesapeake Bay Watershed](#), U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

[www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/pdf/NativePlantsforWildlifeHabitatandConservationLandscaping.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/pdf/NativePlantsforWildlifeHabitatandConservationLandscaping.pdf)

Other books and catalogues were used for descriptive information.

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