

Blue Grama for Low Maintenance Lawns

Blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) is a warm-season, perennial, native grass found throughout the Great Plains of the U.S. Along with buffalograss, this was the major native grass species of the shortgrass prairie. It is often the dominant species on sandy soils, with buffalograss dominating the heavier clay soils. Like buffalograss, blue grama possesses excellent drought and cold hardiness. Although common at lower elevations, blue grama can be found at elevations approaching 7000 feet – where warm-season species would not be expected to persist. This species forms short rhizomes, but appears to be a bunch grass when seeded at low rates or when it is non-irrigated. Under favorable management, it can provide a serviceable turf of low to medium quality. Being a warm-season grass, it will be dormant for the majority of the year in northern areas of its range. Proper management is necessary to achieve reasonable turf quality. Excessive management, in terms of irrigation and fertilization, will promote weed and cool-season grass invasion. It is commonly planted for naturalizing far roughs of golf courses and where homeowners want a lawn that will not be mowed. Blue grama, with its accompanying seed heads, forms a very attractive unmowed turf.

Commercially Available Varieties for Turf Use

There are no turf-type blue grama varieties commercially available. Available varieties were developed for range use and revegetation of disturbed areas, but can be used to produce a lawn of low to moderate quality. ‘**Lovington**’ (released in 1963) and ‘**Hachita**’ (released in 1980) can provide a low to medium quality lawn if mowed at a higher mowing height and provided with supplemental irrigation during extended drought. Lawns often become thin and somewhat “clumpy” in appearance after a few years, especially with no supplemental irrigation and minimal basic lawn management. Much of the blue grama sold is harvested from native stands and sold as ‘Native’ blue grama.

Culture and Management

Seeding Rate: 3-5 pounds per 1000 square feet; blue grama seed is approximately 40% inert matter. Seed early in the year (April-July) to allow seedlings time to mature sufficiently before winter. Blue grama seed germinates quickly (4-6 days) when soil is warm and irrigation is provided. Seedlings are vigorous and will dominate stands if buffalograss is included as part of a seed mix. Some sod is being produced by Colorado growers.

Mowing: 1.5-3 inches for lawns; unmowed blue grama will grow 10-16 inches in height

Irrigation: Does not require supplemental irrigation once established. Better quality will be achieved if irrigation is provided to prevent summer dormancy (2-4 total inches per growing month of combined irrigation + precipitation).

Fertilization: 0-2 pounds N per 1000 square feet annually, depending on desired quality. Apply N during late spring and/or summer, not after August 1.

Pest Problems: Weed invasion is the most important pest problem with blue grama. Blue grama that is irrigated and/or fertilized excessively is prone to weed invasion. Preemergent herbicides labeled for use on buffalograss are safe for blue grama turf. Phenoxy-based herbicides should not be applied to actively growing blue grama turf unless phytotoxicity can be tolerated. Confront (triclopyr+clopyralid) can be safely used on blue grama lawns, where allowed (clopyralid is not labeled for use on residential lawns). Spot applications of glyphosate to weeds in dormant blue grama can effectively control cool-season weeds.