
Wildflower Spot – October 2017

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SWITCHGRASS

Panicum spp.

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These native clump-forming grasses are in full bloom in October, with showy loose flower clusters. Like all grasses, they are deer resistant. Switchgrass was one of the dominant species of the tallgrass prairie that once blanketed the middle of the continent. As such, this North American native is extremely easy to grow and is well adapted to the vagaries of our climate, tolerating both wet and dry sites. Switchgrass will withstand poor drainage and flooding, so it makes a great erosion control, and can tolerate salt spray.

Growing 3 to 7 feet tall in narrow, erect clumps, these sturdy plants can screen undesirable views. They also add rich, long-lasting fall color and winter interest to perennial borders. This grass is simply magnificent in the fall after a touch of frost, and the seedheads make great additions to dried bouquets.

Many cultivars can be found in local nurseries. The shortest and most colorful is the 3-foot tall 'Shenandoah' with reddish leaves and stems; other red cultivars have originated in Germany, with foliage from orange-red to deep burgundy.

'Heavy Metal' grows in a straight stunning column of metallic blue foliage and yellow fall color, maintaining its form all winter. The seedheads of 'Dallis Blue' are a feathery, powder blue that is stunning against a pine woodlands or a white fence.

As a perennial, when switchgrasses are planted in the fall, they can make root growth over the winter, and form nice growth the first year. Subsequent years will see an increase in the height and width of the plant. In March when the new growth appears, the tan stems and leaves can be cut off, and left as mulch around the plant. ❖



Photo: Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.