

# Broomsedge in the Urban Landscape

by Mary Jo Provenzano, Fairfax Master Gardener

Broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*) is a native perennial grass that flourishes in poor soil usually found in meadows and over-grazed pastures. Nicknames for it are Bluestem or Poor Man's Grass. In the past, people would gather it into bunches to make brooms, hence the name "broomsedge."

This plant is often considered a weed because of its aggressive growth habit, its lack of nutritive value and distasteful sharp stems for grazing animals and its dense root systems that make it extremely difficult to remove. Because it tends to grow 2 to 4 feet (60 to 120 cm) in height, it usually outcompetes other grasses and native plants.



photo: OARDC, Ohio Perennial and Biennial Weed Guide

*Broomsedge*

The leaves are flat and partly folded 10 to 15 inches (25 to 40 cm) long and approximately 1/8 inch (30 mm) wide. The fringed ligule is 1/16 inch (15 mm) long. Broomsedge produces many seeds on the upper half of the plant that are distributed by the wind.

photo: Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences



*Broomsedge Seeds*

Despite the significant downside of broomsedge, it does have a few positive characteristics. Its root system holds onto the soil and can be used to help control erosion. Its stems and seeds provide habitat and food for songbirds and other wildlife in the winter when other food supplies are limited. Its blueish green summer stems and leaves and winter copper tones provide color interest all year long. It is also the larval host of the Zabulon Skipper butterfly (*Poanes zebulon*).

Broomsedge is also an ornamental plant for golf courses and residential landscaping and requires low amounts of water. It is found throughout the eastern portion of the United States and grows in a variety of soils, preferring loose sandy moist sites with low fertility.

Transplants of broomsedge are best used for small areas and high visibility sites. The best time for transplanting is in the spring.

Grasses grow slowly and require two to three years to fully establish. Mowing is an effective method for controlling weeds. Mow above the tops of the broomsedge to reduce weed competition. Mowing only the tops keeps from covering up the small grass seedlings.

## What if my landscape has broomsedge and I don't want it there?

There are no quick fixes when it comes to removing broomsedge. Since it only grows in poor soil, you'll need to start with a soil test of the affected area. You can obtain a soil test kit from Fairfax Master Gardeners tables at summer farmers markets or Fairfax County Public Libraries. The analysis you receive from the lab will include soil amendment

recommendations, such as fertilizers, substances needed to adjust soil pH, etc. Following the lab's recommendations for fertilizer and pH adjustment will begin to weaken broomsedge. As you amend the soil, plant a cover crop, such as annual ryegrass, field peas, or oats, to further enhance the soil, as well as hold onto the new soil layer you are creating. If the broomsedge is kept cut before it goes to seed, you can begin to keep it from reproducing and allow other grasses such as fescue to begin to outcompete the taller broomsedge.

#### References

- [Control of Common Grassy Weeds In Pastures and Hayfields](#), Lucas Rector, Kara Pittman and Michael Flessner, Virginia Cooperative Extension
- [Broomsedge, Bluestem, Andropogon virginicus](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service
- [Broomsedge, The Poor Man's Grass](#), North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension