Sheep Fescue
(Festuca ovina)

Where is it found? Sheep fescue occurs on open hillsides, benchlands, parks, meadows, open woodlands, and lightly timbered areas. It often grows with other bunchgrasses, rabbitbrush, and sagebrush, and with such herbs as asters and geraniums. Soils vary from dry or rocky to moist clays.

Is it important? Yes, but only locally. Sheep fescue is not so widely distributed or abundant as Idaho fescue. It does grow on poorer areas and furnishes feed where other plants are scarce. Sheep make better use of this plant than do cattle.

What does it look like? Sheep fescue is a fine-leaved bunchgrass growing in dense tufts 2 to 7 inches high. The very fine rolled leaves are bluish green when fresh and turn grayish with age. Seed stalks extend upwards from the bunches to a height of 7 to 16 inches. Heavy stands of this grass on the range give almost a lawn-like appearance.

◆ Sheep fescue is a smaller version of its brother, Idaho fescue (1/2 x).

Description:

Length of Life—Perennial.

Height—Foliage 2 to 7 inches, seed heads from 7 to 16 inches.

Bunch or Sod—Bunch.

Growth Period—Early spring to midsummer. Dries up in late June or July, depending on elevation.

How does it Spread?—By seed only except for enlargement of bunches by tillering.

Shape of Leaves—Very fine and rolled inwards.

Heads are erect and seeds occur on last 2 to 4 inches in compact branches (panicle) (5 x).
Shape and Size of Seed—Smooth and pointed with a short bristle, very small. Seed cluster (3 to 4) only 1/4 inch long.

Other Names—One closely related variety in Blue Mountains called hard fescue.

How to Use it—Needs to be grazed early while it is still green. May also be taken some in fall after it dries.

Does it look like anything else? Might be confused with its bigger brother, Idaho fescue, but is not so large and sheep fescue has more basal leaves. It does not occur so abundantly over large areas as Idaho fescue.