Columbia Needlegrass

(Stipa columbiana)

Where does it grow? Columbia needlegrass lives on open range in sagebrush and sunny hillsides in the timber. It often grows where other bunchgrasses have been killed out. It is usually found in dry soil on both hills and plains. It often comes in on high elevation ranges, along with squirrel tail and June grass, where the native grasses have been killed or where sagebrush has been burned. There are several other common needlegrasses in Oregon; the best known are needle-and-thread and Thurber's needlegrass.

Is it important? It is a good livestock feed and stays green nearly all summer. This grass sometimes is one of the last good plants to go under excessive grazing and one of the first to return under improved management. It is a valuable forage plant but not one of the very best. The seeds sometimes damage an animal by working into the ear or base of the tongue.

What does it look like? This is a needlegrass with fine leaves and slender stems and it grows in tufts or bunches. The joints and heads are often purplish. The heads are fairly long and narrow with many twisted awns. Each awn grows on a grain and does not break loose without a reason. The grains have sharp points on the base, hence the name needlegrass.

Description:

Height -- Up to 32 inches, usually about 20 to 24.

Heads -- Up to 8 inches long, but usually about 5 inches, purplish color, narrow, brush-like.

Leaves -- Fine, narrow, flat when green, rolled when dry.

The needlegrasses often come in when sagebrush has been burned. All of them have seeds with sharp points (xl).
Method of spread -- Seeds with twisted, bent awns shatter on the ground but the awns twist when moistened and twist again when dry and so work the seed into the soil.

Other names -- Porcupine grass.

Does it look like anything else? It resembles other needlegrasses but has finer leaves, stems, and beards than most. It resembles foxtail barley at times, but foxtail has shorter heads that flare out more with straight awns, not bent and twisted.