

Thurber Needlegrass

(*Stipa thurberiana*)



Where does it grow? Thurber needlegrass occurs in Oregon east of the Cascades. It grows mostly on dry, sandy soils along with big sagebrush and bluebunch wheatgrass. It is not usually found on timbered areas. It grows best on the warm open sagebrush ranges. On some sites, this needlegrass often increases when other bunchgrasses are killed due to overgrazing, fire, or some other kind of disturbance. The deeply penetrating root system makes it fairly resistant to trampling and drought.

Is it important? Yes. Thurber needlegrass greens up early in the spring and provides good forage at a time when other associated perennial grasses are not yet ready to withstand much grazing. However, this grass does not often occur as the main grass in a stand and should not be relied upon too heavily to provide a large percentage of the available forage. It stays green nearly all summer and often provides green forage in the fall after most of the other grasses have dried up. Its forage quality is highest in the spring and early summer and is readily grazed by livestock until the seeds begin to ripen. At this time, it is generally avoided by livestock because of its long, stiff awns. If eaten, the sharp pointed seeds may cause an animal to have a sore mouth and go "off feed". After the seeds have dropped, livestock will resume grazing this grass.

What does it look like? It is a bunchgrass with slender, tufted stems about 1 to 2 feet high and relatively long. The fine leaves grow mostly from the base. The seed heads are fairly long and narrow with many twisted awns. Each awn grows from the tip of a hairy, sharp pointed seed.

Description:

Length of Life--Perennial.

Height--Usually about 1 to 2 feet high.

Bunch or sod--Bunch.

Heads--About 3 to 4 inches long, somewhat purplish color, and narrow.

Leaves--Fine, narrow, with inrolled edges, about 6 to 10 inches long.

Method of spreading--By seed only.

Seed--About 1/4 inch long and sharp pointed with a twice bent, 2-inch awn.
Tiny hairs cover the seed and the lower two segments of the awn.

Other names--Thurber's porcupinegrass.

Does it look like anything else? It resembles other needlegrasses, the most common being needle-and-thread and Columbia needlegrass. Thurber needlegrass differs from these two needlegrasses by having an awn that is characteristically bent twice with tiny hairs from the seed to the second bend in the awn. Thurber needlegrass also closely resembles Idaho fescue except that Idaho fescue has black roots and smooth leaves and leaf sheaths whereas those of Thurber needlegrass are rough.