

Saltgrass

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SALTGRASS—*Distichlis spicata*—Showing entire plant with scaly root, leaves, and seed.
Seed magnified 2 diameters.

Oregon State System of Higher Education
Federal Cooperative Extension Service
Oregon State College
Corvallis

Extension Bulletin 569

November 1941

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(*Distichlis stricta*)

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Illustrations by Cathrine Davis Young

Other name: Desert saltgrass.

Two forms of saltgrass are commonly found in Oregon. One, desert saltgrass (*Distichlis stricta*), occurs on alkali soils in eastern Oregon, and the other, seashore saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*), lives mainly in coast marshes. Seashore saltgrass is effective in controlling erosion and is not harmful in any way. It will not persist after the land has been drained.

Desert saltgrass occupies thousands of acres of alkali soil in eastern Oregon, usually preferring high water table lands. It reproduces by seeds and vigorous, creeping, underground stems that are tough, straw-colored, and scaly with sharp-growing tips. The plant normally grows from 6 to 12 inches tall and has coarse, wiry foliage. Leaves are 3 to 8 inches long, numerous, and arranged in two rows on opposite sides of the stem. They are occasionally flat, but more often inclined to roll, particularly in hot, dry weather. Flowerheads branch somewhat like oats. Seed is borne in compact groups closely overlapping in a head similar to ryegrass. The seed is about the size of ryegrass seed.

Damage. Desert saltgrass is useful because it occupies alkaline areas and furnishes pasture where otherwise only worthless annual weeds would grow. It is harmful when it grows on border-line areas not too alkaline for more valuable plants.

Control. The grass is only a problem on alkali land in eastern Oregon. Alkali concentrates at the surface because of evaporation following upward movement of water through the soil. Drainage and irrigation will usually remove the alkali by removing the condition that caused it to accumulate. If drainage can be developed, the saltgrass will not persist. One season of cultivation will eradicate it. If possible, the land should be seeded to a row crop that can be cultivated for at least one season after summer fallow.

If drainage is not possible, it is usually impracticable to try to control saltgrass. It furnishes some pasture, but not as much as several other grasses. Western wheatgrass is higher yielding and will grow on much of the saltgrass land. Lemmon's alkali-grass and slender speargrass (sometimes called Zawadke's grass) are both more productive and more palatable. Sweetclover will grow on some saltgrass areas. There are a number of other superior native grasses.

If drainage is impracticable, the carrying capacity of saltgrass meadows can often be doubled by seeding strawberry clover after disking or spring-toothing well. The clover will grow on strongly alkaline land provided frequent irrigations are possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: The authors thank Dr. Helen M. Gilkey, Curator of the Herbarium, for reading the manuscript and checking the description of the plant. Professor G. R. Hyslop, In Charge, Division of Plant Industries, made many helpful suggestions.

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Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics
Wm. A. Schoenfeld, Director

Oregon State College and United States Department of Agriculture, Cooperating
Printed and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914