

What to Plant Instead - Native Grass Edition

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Chinese silvergrass (*Miscanthus sinensis*), also known as maiden, eulalia, or zebra grass, is a popular, non-native, ornamental grass used in landscaping. It is a tall (5-12'), densely bunched, perennial with alternate leaves that are up to 40" long. Several cultivars are available so leaf color can vary from green to light green striped. The showy panicles it produces range from silvery to pinkish. [Images of this plant](#) are available at Bugwood.org.

This grass spreads extensively both by seed and by rhizome, displacing native vegetation and reducing biodiversity. It can escape from intentional plantings and form large infestations along roadsides and into forest edges. It is also highly flammable, which can be a concern in fire-prone areas.



Chinese silvergrass - Leslie Mehrhoff, University of Connecticut, bugwood.org

While Chinese silvergrass is officially listed as invasive in 7 Midwest states (IL, IN, MN, MO, OH, WI, KY) as well as Ontario, there are no regulations surrounding its sale or use in these locations. A few states in the Northeast have started to regulate this plant, but since it is still readily available for purchase in our area, it is up to us as consumers to avoid this plant and seek non-invasive alternatives.

Luckily, there are several native grasses that can provide similar aesthetics and have a host of ecosystem benefits. For yards or sites that require more compact landscaping, consider planting prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), or purple lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*). Prairie dropseed reaches 2-4' tall, produces airy flowerheads, and makes a nice border. The seeds are enjoyed by juncos and sparrows, but do not generally self-sow freely in gardens. It is also deer resistant and tolerant of being planted near black walnut. Little bluestem reaches 2-3', with blue green leaves that change to a reddish-bronze in fall. Its dense form allows it to remain upright through the winter. It is a host plant for a variety of skipper butterflies. Purple lovegrass (not to be confused with invasive *Eragrostis cilianensis*, which sometimes goes by the name lovegrass) is showy and low-growing, reaching just about 1 foot in height, and can form a nice border. It likes full sun and is tolerant of hot, dry conditions. It produces pink, airy seed heads that eventually break off and tumble around. It goes dormant in winter.



Prairie dropseed planted as a border in front of purple coneflower - Michelle Beloskur

For large properties or natural areas, big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), and switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) are excellent choices. All three are fast growing and provide habitat and forage for songbirds, gamebirds, and serve as larval hosts for a variety of butterflies. Big bluestem reaches 5-8' in height with an attractive blue-green color in spring followed by purple tinted flowers and a red/bronze color in fall and winter. Switchgrass reaches 3-8' with fluffy, airy looking panicles that are similar to miscanthus, but with a purple tint. Indian grass reaches 4-7' with foliage that is blue-green in the summer, turning golden in fall.

Native grasses can be planted in fall or spring. If you are looking for information on planting and maintaining prairie grasses and plants in your garden, the [University of Minnesota Extension](#) has some helpful resources.