USDA NRCS
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Plant Fact Sheet

ALKALI SACATON

Sporobolus airoides

(Torr.) Torr.

Plant Symbol = SPAI

Contributed by: USDA NRCS East Texas Plant Materials Center

Photo courtesy of Kika de la Garza Plant Materials Center

Alternate Names
bunchgrass, finetop salt grass

Uses
Livestock: Alkali sacaton is good forage for horses and cattle in the far western United States in arid or semiarid regions.

Wildlife: This plant is a source of food for deer, small mammals (it is relished by jackrabbits), birds (game and non game), and waterfowl.

Conservation: Alkali sacaton is frequently utilized for seeding and stabilizing disturbed areas. Due to its salt tolerance, it is recommended for seeding saline sites such as oil well pits and saline waste from power generating plants.

Landscaping: A mass planting of this species could create a contrast to coarser foliaged plants.

Status
Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description and Adaptation
Alkali sacaton is a native perennial large bunchgrass ranging in height from 50 to 150 cm (20-60 inches). The leaves are flat, 2-6 mm (1/16-1/4 inches) wide, and taper from the base of the leaf. The inflorescence is an open panicle 20-50 cm (8-20 inches) long with a pyramidal shape. The small seeds rest singly on branches in the loose, open seedhead. Bloom periods vary by region: April to May in the Southwest, June-October in the Great Plains, and July-August in the Northwest.

Alkali sacaton is found in the western half of the United States. It grows in both saline and nonsaline coarse, medium, and fine textured soils. This grass is tolerant of salinity and a broad range of pH. After establishment, alkali sacaton is tolerant of drought and water inundation. However, it is intolerant of shade and is found growing in open areas.

Establishment
Alkali sacaton reproduces from seeds and tillers. The seeds remain viable for years and germinate without being scarified. In Utah, a seed study reported 99% seed germination of seeds that were stored in an open warehouse for 7 years. Plant seeds in the spring when soil temperature will be near 86^{0} F (30^{0} C) and precipitation probabilities are greatest. The plants can survive on 12 to 18 inches of precipitation per year.

Management
Alkali sacaton is an important forage species in the arid and semiarid regions of the Southwest United States. The grass is tolerant of moderate grazing and a good forage producer. It has the ability to efficiently use extra water during forage production. Alkali sacaton is tolerant of fire; however, it can be killed if the fire is severe. Fire recovery has been reported from 2 to 4 years. Summer fires have more of an effect than winter fires.

Pests and Potential Problems
Alkali sacaton is considered a primary or secondary invader on saline soils. The plant intrudes directly on saline flats or follows a stage where "succulent" plants are dominant.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)
'Salado' was released by the Los Lunas, New Mexico Plant Materials Center in 1982. It originated from a seed collection in Lincoln County in central New Mexico.

Saltalk' was released in 1981 by the James E. 'Bud" Smith Plant Materials Center. The original collection was made in Beckham County in western Oklahoma.

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/>, and visit the PLANTS Web site <http://plants.usda.gov> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov>