

# The Many Benefits of Switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*, in Your Landscape

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Native grasses provide many ecological benefits to a landscape. They minimize soil erosion and increase organic matter available in the landscape. They are drought tolerant with a low water requirement, and require no supplemental nutrients. In addition, native grasses provide habitat and a reliable food source for birds, native bees, and perhaps more importantly, they are an essential larval food source for many species of native butterflies and moths.

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) is a perennial grass species native to Minnesota and the upper Midwest that was common in the tall grass prairies that once dominated our landscape. Switchgrass is a warm season grass that is capable of thriving in wide range of environments. It is a tall, attractive species which flowers from August through September with a beautiful reddish-purple seed head atop glossy leaves.



Photo by Mary Meyer

Switchgrass is an important native grass species as it supports many species of native butterflies. It is an essential larval food for many butterflies including the tawny-edge skipper (*Polites themistocles*), the Delaware skipper (*Anatrytone logan*), and the Leonard's skipper (*Heperia leonardus*). The Leonard's skipper is listed as a species of special concern on the Minnesota List of Endangered, Threatened, or Special Concern Species.

Switchgrass is a hardy, deep-rooted grass that requires very little maintenance once it is established. It grows to a height of 3-6 feet. Its ripe seeds are showy and often a deep reddish-purple color. Its leaves turn to golden in autumn. Switchgrass is highly adaptable and capable of thriving in many conditions, and soil types. Several varieties of Switchgrass are available to Minnesota gardeners including: 'Dallas Blues' which is tall with purple panicles; 'Shenandoah' and 'Prairie Fire' which are beautifully red and purple; and 'Northwind' which has a stiff, upright character.

By planting Switchgrass, and other native grasses, into your landscape you are providing a host of ecological benefits to your landscape. These benefits include a reduction in soil erosion, an increase in organic materials, and crucial habitat for many songbirds, and pollinators. In addition, you can enjoy the year-round interest of this beautifully ornamental and environmentally sustainable plant.