



“Plains Bristlegrass at Ramsey Nature Park glows at sunset.”

#### FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Setaria leucopila*

Common Names: Plains Bristlegrass

Family: Poaceae

#### **Plains Bristlegrass May Attract Small Birds**

Finally, a good reference site is accessible on the web for studying native grasses:  
<http://uvalde.tamu.edu/herbarium/sele.htm>. Many have hoped for such a site for a very long time. This one features excellent close-up color photos, illustrating tiny structures which distinguish one grass from another.

In addition to the detailed photographs this site features, plant descriptions are written in understandable language!

It takes some clever writing to describe salient features of a grass without lapsing into botanical terminology. My hat is off to Texas A & M Extension Center at Uvalde. Their “Virtual Herbarium,” especially the GRASSES section, is a resource Texans can be proud of. Here is their summary regarding today’s featured plant:

“Plains Bristlegrass can be found in sandy to sandy loam soils of the Edwards Plateau and South Texas Plains. It can grow to a height of 3 feet with stems branching from the base and nodes. Small hairs can be seen below the nodes on the stem. The flat or folded leaves are 3 to 14 inches in length and 1/16 to 3/8 inch wide. Plains Bristlegrass begins growth in early spring and may flower more than once a year depending on moisture. Similar to Knotroot Bristlegrass, there

is a bristle below each seed, but only one. Plains Bristlegrass has fair economic value for wildlife and good value for livestock.”

Plains Bristlegrass is an attractive component of Arroyo Colorado brush. It is found on sunny edges. It has grown well where I've transplanted it into clay areas, often in places where few other plants would thrive. Dr. Lonard points out that it is “Common in our area, most often found in clay soils.” (*Grasses of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*, 1993.)

Over the years, I've transplanted various grasses to my yard, especially “clump” grasses which would not require mowing. In studying these grasses, I've noticed many small seed-eating birds flitting away when I approach.

Transplanting these grasses, I have reasoned, will bring new and different birds to my yard. They are growing too far away from windows, however, to accurately test that reasoning.

Many “wild” transplanted grasses of short stature and limited numbers have become taller and exceedingly prolific in the growing conditions of my yard. Plains Bristlegrass has been less of a surprise, maintaining an attractive growth less than about three feet in height. In addition, it has not proliferated wildly.

It may be that the seed has a low germination rate. This is unfortunate for those who would propagate the plant in mass quantity for grazers.

Kika de la Garza Plant Materials Center has been attempting large-scale production of Plains Bristlegrass for use in restoring grazing lands. At times, the germination rate for seed has been disappointingly low.

There is pressing need for a more complete grass field guide for this area, color photo-illustrated and written in layman's terms. One needs many close-up photos to understand the minute details which distinguish one grass species from another.

The website mentioned above is helpful. Yet only one species of *Setaria* is adequately represented with detailed photographs. Two species of *Setaria* are listed on the website. In contrast, Dr. Robert Lonard lists ten species of *Setaria* in *Guide to the Grasses of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*. Only three *Setaria* species are illustrated in Lonard's book, with black and white “scratch plates,” leaving many questions of true grass identity unanswered.

If you would like to admire Plains Bristlegrass with a group of plant-loving nature enthusiasts, you might enjoy a walk through Ramsey Park, where the pretty grass is identified with a special sign.

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