

# Sand Dropseed

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Sand dropseed is a native perennial bunchgrass growing 18 to 42 inches in height. The bases are tufted with erect or spreading stems. The plant is bluish-green curing to a straw yellow. Leaf blades are flat,  $\frac{1}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch wide and 3 to 12 inches long and tapering toward the tips. If you look closely you will notice the leaf rolls inward as the plant matures. The leaf blade immediately below the seed head grows out from the stem at almost a 90-degree angle and is known as a flag leaf. Sheaths are rounded with a visible tuft of long white hairs at the collar; the lower sheaths are shorter than the internodes while the upper are much longer. Ligule is a ring of very short hairs. Seed head is an open panicle, lead-colored or purplish and 5 to 14 inches in length. Seed head on different plants may be fully or partially open and totally or partially enclosed by the upper sheath. The reddish-orange seeds are minute, requiring about five million seeds to equal one pound. Sand dropseed grows in all vegetational regions with the exception of the Piney Woods.

Sand dropseed produces a fair amount of forage and is considered fair grazing for all classes of livestock. Crude protein values for August run 9 to 10 percent but decrease later in the year. The grazing value for wildlife is poor for deer. The seeds are occasionally found in quail crops and are eaten by songbirds. The most palatable grazing happens when the plants are actively growing in spring through early summer. Mature plants cure well but are not readily selected by livestock. Plants reproduce from seed and existing plants increase in size by tillering. Sand dropseed increases on rangeland where heavy grazing has occurred for many years reducing the quantity of more palatable grasses. Seed remains viable for many years and will germinate with moisture to revegetate a pasture following the effects of drought or overgrazing. Come fall the matured seed heads show a gentle curved appearance of the seed head which is usually inside the partially enclosed sheath.

An interesting story related to the seeds happened back in 1984 when I was working in the Snyder Soil Conservation Service (SCS) field office. The Upper Colorado soil and water conservation district covers two counties, Scurry and Borden and the Snyder office works both counties. As a young range conservationist, I spent much of my time working with ranches in Borden county. A call for seed collection of sand dropseed was made by the Bud Smith USDA Plant Materials Center in Knox City. As I drove around the county and worked with ranchers I would keep an eye out for good stands of this native grass. At that time when grasses were being collected for PMC trials we were instructed to look for tall, leafy plants from which to collect seed. While driving down Outlaw road in western Borden county I saw an excellent stand of sand dropseed near the county road. After receiving permission from the landowner, I watched the grasses when out in that part of the county and when ripened I hopped the fence to make a collection. I used a large paper sack like you used to get from grocery stores for the collection. Pushing the open sack down into the grasses I would bend over the grass stalk and rub the seed head between my hands to loosen the seeds from the partially enclosed sheaths dropping them into the sack. I moved the sack around always looking ahead and selecting the tallest plants. As the collection progressed the paper sack began to get fairly wrinkled and torn at the top but still held the seeds. The collection request was for  $\frac{1}{4}$  pound of seed which took a good bit of time to collect.

When satisfied that I had enough seed I drove back to Snyder and since it was after 5:00 pm I just set the sack in a chair in my office and went home. The next morning, I started to complete the paperwork prior to mailing the collection and noticed the sack was not in the chair. I looked around the office, went out and looked in the drab olive green 1976 SCS pickup of that era but could not find the sack of seed. I then looked in my office trash can and saw it was empty. At that time, we had trash pickup twice a week and the janitors had been there the night before. I called them and yes, they remembered a wrinkled-up paper sack that was picked up with the trash. When informed I needed to retrieve that sack they said it was gone and the dumpster had already been picked up, so it was indeed gone but they would be glad to pay for the seed. Sadly, I said no you can't pay for these seeds and resigned that I would have to make a second collection at

the sand dropseed site. When back on the site I was having to now collect seed from plants not quite as tall and leafy as the first collection, but I managed to gather enough seed to send to Knox City.

Shortly after I received a letter from the PMC confirming receipt of a collection of sand dropseed and that it would soon be put into test rows with other collections of sand dropseed from across Texas. Afterward every three to four years I would receive a letter from the PMC stating that my collection was selected for further testing and seed increase. Not until the year 2000 did I receive a certificate identifying this collection as the release now known as Borden County sand dropseed. So, if you have planted sand dropseed in the last two decades you have used seeds with origins from that Borden County collection. As a side note, I have often wondered just how good those seeds from the first collection would have been, but we will never know.

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Photo captions:

1 A small cluster of sand dropseed showing the different stages of growth of stems with some seed heads enclosed and others emerged from the sheaths.



2 A robust sand dropseed plant with emerging seed heads.



3 Tuft of long white hairs at the collar of sand dropseed is a good clue for identification.



4 Flag leaf comes off stem at almost 90-degree angle.



5 The maturing stems of sand dropseed reveal the curved tops of the seed heads still enclosed within the sheaths.

