

Virginia and Canada Wildrye
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As you drive through or ride across the pastures perhaps you are noticing bunchgrass clumps that are green in the middle of winter. There is a good chance you have one or both of our two native, cool season, perennial wildryes. Virginia and Canada wildrye can reach heights of 48 inches though usually seen from 18 to 36 inches in height. The base of the leaf blade clasps the stems with auricles, think of a claw-like extension of the collar found at the junction of the leaf blade and leaf sheath. The upper surface of the leaves of Canada wildrye will be rough to the touch while those of Virginia may be smooth or rough to the touch especially near the leaf tip. Width of Virginia wildrye leaves can be up to $\frac{5}{8}$ inch while those of Canada can approach $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. Leaf length of both species runs 5 to 12 inches.

The seedheads are where you can easily identify which species you are seeing. Seedhead of Virginia wildrye is a tight spike, 2 to 6 inches in length that remains straight in growth and maturity. The glumes covering the seeds form a bowed out "U" shape rather than the sharp "V" shape of Canada wildrye. The awns extending from the glumes of Virginia are shorter than in Canada wildrye, giving a shorter, neater look to the seedhead of Virginia wildrye. The seedhead of Canada wildrye is a tight spike, though much longer at 4 to 9 inches in length that begins to curve or nod when approaching maturity. The curving seedhead can be used to quickly differentiate Canada wildrye from Virginia wildrye which you now know has a straight seedhead. The glumes covering the seeds form a sharp "V" shape as opposed to the "U" shape in Virginia wildrye. The curving seedhead with wide spreading awns has a scruffy appearance as compared to the shorter and straighter awns of Virginia wildrye. The early botanists who roamed these prairies and hills could have made it simpler for us trying to remember the identification clues if they had thought to name the "V" shaped glume Virginia but it is the opposite. So, remember that the "V" shaped glumes are Canada and the "U" shaped ones are Virginia. One simple way to remember which is which is this, Canada lies over the US so it curves over our northern border the same way Canada wildrye seedheads curve approaching maturity.

Both species of wildrye are very palatable and relished by all classes of livestock. Forage values for livestock are high. These grasses are especially beneficial as green forage during winter months when few other green grasses may be present. Forage value for deer and antelope is fair with new tender leaves being selected. Crude protein value, for leaves only in April is 14 percent, while protein for leaves and stems from winter into spring runs 7 to 9.5 percent. Seed value for game and songbirds is low though the large bunchgrass clumps do provide nesting cover for ground nesting birds. These wildryes are considered decreasers and will be eliminated from pastures that are overstocked, or overused. Like many decreasers these two will often be relegated to growing in protected sites, roadsides or pastures where livestock do not have access. Proper grazing management to maintain or increase the amount of desirable plants includes proper stocking rates, periodic rest from grazing and rotating livestock through the pastures.

One word of warning or maybe this is just a pet peeve of mine, do not confuse wildryes with "ryegrass". Ryegrass is an introduced cool season grass that is extremely invasive and aggressive. Ryegrass is available in annual and perennial varieties and is planted in the fall. If you buy ryegrass seed to extend you're grazing into the winter months and the ryegrass makes a seed crop, you will never be able to get rid of it. It has tremendous tenacity to germinate, grow and mature seeds every year and it will soon become the dominant vegetation where once planted. Much of the Blackland Prairie belt in Central Texas is now dominated by ryegrass. As it increases in density during late spring it begins to shade out and take moisture away from warm season native grasses and forbs that are ready to begin growth.

Canada wildrye will grow on dry open prairies as well as shaded bottomland sites. It grows best on medium-textured soils, but grows on most soils of the prairies. Virginia wildrye will grow in a wide variety of soils, from sands to clays and can stand a higher level of shaded ground than Canada wildrye. Seed of both species of wildrye is commercially available for adding to range seeding mixes. Historically, on most

range ecosites, these grasses made up 5 to 15 percent composition of the climax vegetation. Seedheads will be appearing from April to May so take a look at which species you might have, knowing now that both are good for livestock, good for the land, and good for the landowner.

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Photo Captions:

1. Typical look at a Virginia wildrye bunchgrass clump



2. Lush growth of Virginia wildrye in early summer



3. Canada wildrye seedheads growing in the May sunshine



4. The straight seedheads of Virginia wildrye show the less scruffy appearance as compared to Canada wildrye



5. Mid-June seedheads of Canada wildrye show the golden color of maturing plants



6. The bowed-out U shaped glumes of Virginia wildrye



7. The V shaped glumes just above the stem are easily seen in this photo of Canada wildrye

