Little Bluestem
by Marty Fisher

Schizachyrium scoparium
Family: Poaceae

Most gardeners, when visiting a nursery, head straight to the blooming flower section. Most nursery owners foster this by placing the flowers up front and the grasses in a far back corner. Grasses in the landscape, however, can not only be beautiful but can also add texture and provide interest each year to the fall and winter garden far longer than most flowering plants. The plants of the Poaceae family have many positive attributes.

Little Bluestem is only blue-green when it first shows up in the warm summer sun, but it is not little by plant standards, growing from 18 to 40 inches during the summer months. (Andropogon gerardii, Big Bluestem, reaches 5 to 8 feet in height.) Little Bluestem’s time to shine is in the fall when it turns a rust-orange color that lasts until it is clipped short the next spring. Having fairly stiff stalks makes it perfect for flower arrangements. Left in the yard it adds color to the winter pallette and is particularly stunning when a light snow is held within its leaves.

Several hundred years ago Little Bluestem was the most abundant species in the American mixed grass prairie region. American Indians used it for a clothing fiber, softened it and put it in their moccasins in the winter for insulation, and dried it to be used as ceremonial switches in their sweat lodges. Wildlife forage on the grass clumps but deer avoid them. Native bees nest beneath the grass and may harvest parts of it to construct their nests. The seeds provide food for small mammals and granivorous birds.

Today Little Bluestem is found in man-made or disturbed habitats, including grasslands, woodlands and meadows, rock outcrops and even the margins of wetlands. It tolerates a wide variety of soils. However, it does not survive in swampy areas.

According to Go Botany, the notable characteristics of grass-like plants are that they have narrow-blade leaves with a tubular sheath around the stems. The flowers are small and difficult to see. The flowers are attached to the branches rather than to the main axis of the inflorescence. The plants have rhizomes: horizontal underground stems with roots growing from them. The leaves sprout from the base in clumps and in time, left undisturbed, they will form sod.

Propagation
Little Bluestem can easily be grown from seed. If the grass is available, strip the leaves from bottom to top, collecting the seed in your hand as you go. Seed can be bought from native seed nurseries. Since Little Bluestem is a warm season grass, it is best to start the germination process during the summer. After a few weeks a single leaf stem appears. For a while nothing more seems to be happening, but underground
a root system is developing to support the tall leaves in the future. It is best to keep the plant in a pot the first year, or it may get mixed up with the unwanted grass in the garden and be pulled out by mistake. The second year the plant is distinctive enough to recognize it from common lawn grass. It can then be safely planted.

Cultivation
The best location for Little Bluestem is in a spot near a rock wall or at the back of the garden. It does very well in a large decorative planter and can actually be left there year round. It will be bluest and happiest in a dry place. The only care it needs is for the leaves to be cut back to 3 or 4 inches each spring before the first green shoots arrive. After several years, when the clump becomes large and the center is starting to die back, it can be split in half or quarters and each section can be put in a new place or shared with a neighbor. Doing this will rejuvenate the plant and you can expect several more summers of waving green leaves, soft fall color, and winter enjoyment.

References

WEB
https://gobotony.newenglandwild.org
www.wildflower.org/ladybird

RIWPS Policy
Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: “Cultivation Note” is a regular feature in WildfloraRI, the Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at Richard.Fisher2@cox.net. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — WildfloraRI Editorial Committee.