

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #76 answer: INDIAN GRASS (*Sorghastrum nutans*)

Indian grass is a warm-season bunch grass, meaning that it blooms late in summer (when it is warm) and forms clumps, rather than thick, continuous sod. Like other warm-season grasses, it is a “C4” grass, with a special way of absorbing carbon dioxide. When carbon dioxide is chemically fixed in the cell, the first compound has four carbon atoms, rather than the usual three. Reducing water vapor loss, this chemical pathway is a plus in hot, dry climates.

Blue-green in spring and golden in fall, Indian grass is the second most dominant grass in midwestern prairies, and it grows well also in our eastern managed grasslands. Spreading by below-ground buds, it recovers quickly from fire.

This grass is lovely to both hand and eye. Soft hairs on the flowers give the nodding plume a silky feel. Large yellow stamens form a cheerful contrast to the other, brownish flower parts (glumes, lemmas, and paleas). With a loupe you can see feathery purplish stigmas.

It is wind pollinated—think of the dangling yellow stigmas blowing in the wind and dispersing clouds of pollen—but it can’t pollinate itself. More of its resources go to producing pollen than to producing ovules, to increase the odds of pollen landing on an appropriate stigma.

Indian grass depends on mycorrhizal fungi to absorb phosphorus, and it might even take nutrients from other mycorrhizal plants in its vicinity, allowing it to outcompete them. It is one of only a few grasses that host the larvae of the pepper and salt skipper (*Amblyscirpes hegon*). It gives year-round cover for birds and small mammals, and its fuzzy, long-tailed seeds feed birds.

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Clues: A triangle of bracts holds a nosegay of little purple flowers.



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