



SEED & SUPPLIES FOR NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

## NATIVE GRASS LAWNS

California native grass lawns are playing an expanding role in the increasingly important landscape practice of covering the ground with *water-conservative plants*. Native grasses are gradually becoming a realistic choice for mowed lawns in residential landscapes, business and school campuses, golf courses, roof gardens, public parks and other municipal settings. As mowed lawn, select native grasses can provide a living plant surface suitable for rest and recreation. Capable of supporting foot traffic and offering visual appeal, these lawns can dramatically reduce the input of environmentally questionable practices associated with the maintenance of traditional turf lawns.

**CANDIDATES:** After almost a decade of informal trials and observations, we have concluded that the following four species stand out as the best candidates for establishing native lawns in Northern California when seeded at the rate of 2 PLS lbs per 1,000 sq.ft. <http://www.pcseed.com/docs/PureLiveSeed.pdf>

- *Agrostis pallens*. **California Thingrass**. A form of perennial bentgrass native to California, California Thingrass performs quite differently from its distant relatives, the hybridized creeping bentgrasses used as the standard for putting greens. Thingrass can create a casual lawn surface with regular mowing to 2 inches. With moderate mowing to 4 inches, Thingrass can spread by seeds, stolons, and rhizomes, making an even denser sod. With minimal mowing to 10 inches, Thingrass can create a lush ground cover. Prefers good drainage. A California Thingrass lawn is demonstrated at the experimental lawn section of the Markham Arboretum (City of Concord).
- *Deschampsia caespitosa subsp. Holiciformus*. **Tufted Hairgrass**. This lower-growing subspecies of Hairgrass adapts to mowing but maintenance at any height lower than 3 inches may result in irregular density and an uneven surface. Prefers moist soils. One large public planting occupies the 30-acre expanse at San Francisco's renovated Crissy Field.
- *Festuca rubra 'Molate'*. **Molate Red Fescue**. Fine-textured and upright-growing blades make for easy mowing of this popular variety of native fescue. Already the most widely used of native fescues in the Greater Bay Area, this



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plant's tolerance of a wide range of soils helps during its grow-in and its mature phase once established. Benefiting from partial shade and irrigation in hotter interior Northern California, 'Molate' can, with supplemental water, be kept completely or partially green all year round. This is one of three fine fescues included in our non-mowed Native Ornamental Fine Fescue Blend <http://www.pcseed.com/docs/Fine Fescue Mixes Native.pdf>.

- *Koeleria macrantha*. **Coastal Junegrass**. Low mowing of this medium green and densely upright grass gives Junegrass a strong resemblance to traditional lawns. While Junegrass' aversion to any fertilization may be a positive feature of any low-maintenance regimen, the plant is simply not forgiving: applications of phosphorous will prove fatal and inadvertent fertilization will damage a stand. Tolerates drier soils and mows well to 3 inches. A Coastal Junegrass lawn is in place at the newly redesigned California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park.

**INSTALLATION:** The seeding of these plants as lawns ought to be approached with other than routine turf-type expectations. While native lawn sites should receive appropriate cultivation, amendments, and grading, alternative fertilizers may be indicated by pre-plant soil analysis. Instead of standard faster-acting fertilizers, it may prove advisable to employ a slower-acting organic fertilizer such as BIO-SOL MIX 7-2-3 <http://www.pcseed.com/docs/BioSolMix7-2-3.pdf> at the rate of 25 lbs per 1,000 sq.ft. The initial incorporation of AM-120 mycorrhizal inoculum at the rate of 2 lbs per 1,000 sq.ft. <http://www.pcseed.com/docs/MycorrhizalInoculumAM-120.pdf> may also improve the seedling stage of native plant growth in soils determined to be deficient in certain features.

**WEED CONTROL:** Competitive weed growth presents a challenge to the initial establishment of almost *all* direct-seeded lawns and native lawns are no exceptions. Indeed, since natives require a longer grow-in period than conventional turfgrass, or even the hybrid fine fescues used in our Non-Mow Blend, weed control is that much more critical for success.

**IRRIGATION:** Significant differences in water management goals will call for different strategies at non-irrigated, lightly irrigated, and fully irrigated sites. Like all California native plants, the four species described above are capable of surviving *after establishment* with only natural precipitation. The ideal time to plant the seeds would be upon the arrival of cooler fall season weather in order to take advantage of winter rainfall.



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The innovative use of native grasses as alternative mowed lawns will prove most rewarding for those who adapt their management practices to specific sites and adjust their expectations of desired effects. Whatever the horticultural treatment, the successful seeding of California native grass lawns offers possibilities for reduced volumes of irrigation, reduced frequency of mowing, and enhanced awareness of the environmental processes which can naturally take place.