

# BACKYARD NATURE

## Grasses are distinctive



TIM NOWICKI

As I drive down the country roads these days, I pass many fields of grass. These fields are all just one kind of grass. You've all seen them, they're fields of corn. Yes corn is a grass. But while you are out in the country take note of some smaller patches of grass.

Along the ditches next to the roadside are often some very distinctive grasses. In the low area where water collects there will be green plants, but these are more likely to be sedges or rushes. They tend to like wet areas. But just up from the wet soil in dryer conditions grasses will start to grow.

In the backlit conditions of my early morning drive to work, I particularly like the squirrel's tail that grows in dense groups along the ditch. The most noticeable part is the head area which points in the same direction on all the plants. By pointing in the same direction they form a thick cloud of fine fibers. They do resemble fluffy squirrel's tails arching in the same directions at about the height of a squirrel sitting on the ground.

In contrast to the 12-inch high squirrel's tail is the reed grass Phragmites. It too has a head that arches to one side, but it is more feathery and it stands about 8-10 feet tall. Phragmites grows in the low areas along the expressways.

In colonial times and in other parts of the continent, people collected the long stems of Phragmites and thatched the roofs of their homes with it. This reed was also used to make ink pens. Inside the hollow stem are fine tubes that transport water up to the top. If you take a dried, dead stalk and cut it off like a quill pen point and dip it into ink, the small tubes will draw up ink and it can be used as a pen.

Though squirrel's tail and Phragmites are interesting to see, I saw the most beautiful grass of the season while visiting friends in northern Michigan. Northern Michigan's sandy soils are perfect for the purple love grass to grow. Large patches of purple covered entire fields. Not only did it look beautiful, but it felt wonderful. Each of the delicate branches just barely touched my skin. They feel like fairy fingers deftly tickling you as you walk.

Late summer is the time for many grasses to become noticeable. Take the time to see and feel some of these fall grasses.

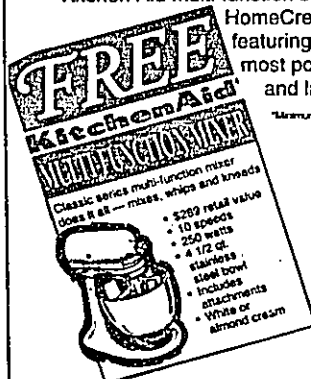


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