Wiregrass (Aristida stricta)

Wiregrass is a native species of the sandhills and coastal plain regions of southeastern United States. Like other native grass species of the southeast, wiregrass is a perennial bunchgrass which grows in dense “bunches” or clumps. It is distinguished from other native bunchgrasses by its narrow, wire-like blades and unique, three-awned seeds.

Wiregrass is adapted to the droughty, nutrient-poor sands of the sandhills and was historically the dominant groundcover species across most of the longleaf pine forests of the region. The presence of wiregrass in longleaf pine forests plays an important role in maintaining biodiversity by providing fuels necessary for carrying fires crucial to the reproduction and survival of numerous plant species. Wiregrass also provides nesting and foraging habitat for wildlife species such as bobwhite quail and the endangered Bachman’s sparrow. For these reasons, wiregrass is often described as a “keystone species” of the longleaf pine ecosystem.

Like longleaf pine, wiregrass has suffered severe declines since European settlement due to land conversion and fire suppression. Until recently, reintroduction of wiregrass to degraded areas was considered nearly impossible due to the belief that wiregrass plants rarely, if ever, produced viable seed. Studies over the last decade, however, have shown that wiregrass will produce an abundance of quality seed if plants are burned during spring or summer months. Many other plants of the longleaf pine ecosystem also depend on growing season fires for seed production. Because of this, land managers in the southeast have begun to use growing season fires for managing longleaf pine/wiregrass habitats.

Wiregrass produces fruiting stems (culms) in the fall following a spring or summer burn. Seeds begin maturing in late November and fall from the culms from mid November through January. In dry sandhills sites, most wiregrass seed germination occurs in late February through early April.

To establish wiregrass plants from seed, several steps need to be followed:

1. site preparation - burn, rake or lightly disc the area to be seeded to remove weedy competition and to prepare a bare mineral soil seed bed. Wiregrass seedlings require direct light for maximum growth, so thin canopy trees as much as possible.

2. seed sowing - in dry sites, sow seed between January and February. Avoid sowing in April or May, as spring droughts will lead to low germination. Make sure seed is in contact with bare mineral soil. A fine layer of sand (no more than 1/8th inch) can be spread on top of seeds to insure good soil contact.

3. watering - no irrigation is necessary, though supplemental watering during drought periods will generally improve seed germination and increase seedling growth rates.

4. fire - two years after establishment, wiregrass plants can be burned. Burning will reduce weedy competition and, if done in spring and summer, will trigger seed production.

For more information about wiregrass, contact:
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