

# THOSE GRASS NAMES

## Where Do They Come From?

by Lewis L. Yarlett

Names are universal necessities. They give identity, provide title, and designate specific objects. They can also be descriptive, especially in the case of grasses. Scientific names of grasses and other plants are assigned

only after review by the International Botanical Congress. Common names, however, are often used only locally, and several different names may be applied over a geographical area.

In Florida, color appears to have been the characteristic which gave purple top, *Tridens flavus*, its common name. The spreading panicle-type inflorescence is a deep purple when mature.

Consider bluejoint panicum, *Panicum tenerum*. The joints or nodes of this wet prairie grass are distinctly purple.

The very odor of buzzardgrass, *Heteropogon melanocarpus*, suggests the decaying odor of the buzzard's diet.

It was perhaps the early settlers of Florida or the Indians that were responsible for the name toothache grass, *Ctenium aromaticum*. Basal portions of the culms below ground level produce a distinct deadening effect on the gum and tongue.

The common name for *Aristida stricta* is derived from the Latin "strict" meaning stiff and upright, referring to the wire-like blades of wiregrass. However, ranchers know wiregrass by its tough rolled blades. The spreading stiff inflorescence of bottlebrush, *Aristida speciformis*, no doubt gave it the common name.

Geographic names have also been used to provide a common name. Florida needlegrass, *Stipa arenocoides*, besides having its Florida designation, also has a distinct and sharp needle-like projection on the seed.

Others with geographic names include Sanibel Island lovegrass, *Eragrostis tracyi*, and Key West threeawn, *Aristida floridana*, which was known only from the original collection from Key West.

The word "florid" or "florida" alludes to flowers, and perhaps the name Florida bluestem, *Andropogon floridanus*, was thus given to this

species with its velvety white inflorescence in the fall. It is also a South Florida species.

More importantly, however, are the names of persons who through the years have explored, collected, and described the grass genera and species. Many grasses with a significant distribution in Florida and elsewhere in the Southeast bear their names. Many professionals explored the grasses; however, botanists have the largest representation in the names.

Combs panicum, *panicum combsii*, bears the name of Robert Combs (1872-1899) who collected extensively in Florida and Cuba.

Allen Curtiss (1845-1907) was a noted collector of Jacksonville, Florida. Curtiss threeawn, *Aristida curtissii*, and Curtiss dropseed, *Sporobolus curtissii*, both bear his name.

Stephen Elliott (1771-1830), a pioneer botanist, was also a respected legislator. One very prominent grass, Elliott bluestem, *Andropogon elliottii*, and a lesser species, slender Indiangrass, *Sorghastrum elliottii*, bear witness to his interest in the grasses.

It is noteworthy that the distinguished former professor of botany at Harvard University, Dr. Asa Gray (1818-1888), is not represented in the grass names of Florida.

Ferdinand Jakob Lindheimer (1801-1879) was a German-born collector and newspaper editor who resided in New Braunfels, Texas. In Florida and elsewhere, Lindheimer panicum; *Panicum lindheimeri*, is one of the common "low panicums".

Gotthilf Muhlenberg (1753-1815), born in Pennsylvania and pastor of a Lutheran church at Lancaster, was

also a pioneer botanist and author. Our little blue maidencane, *Amphicarpum muhlenbergianum*, is named after him.

Andre Michaux (1746-1802), a French botanist who explored extensively in the eastern United States, probably collected and first described longleaf cupgrass, *Erichloa michauxii*. This species occurs in southeastern Georgia and Florida.

The well-known smutgrass, *Sporobolus poiretii*, a pest in the improved pastures of Florida, was given the species name from Jean Louis Marie Poiret (1755-1834), a French botanist.

A physician and druggist of Key West, John Loomis Blodgett (1809-1853) first collected and described the paspalum, *P. blodgettii*.

Likewise, an Italian apothecary and author of Naples, Ferrento Imperato (1550-1625), has his name given to the genus *Imperato*. This is the well-known cogan grass, *I. cylindrica*.

The genus *Leersia* has been named after another druggist, German-born Johann Daniel Leers (1727-1774). Several species of cutgrasses, *Leersia* occur in Florida marshes.

Ornithologists were also active in the early collection of grasses. Cabanis bluestem, *Andropogon cabanisii*, is named after the German Jean Cabanis (1816-1906) who collected extensively in Florida.

Sand cordgrass, *Spartina bakeri*, a large robust grass common on the edge of freshwater marshes, is named after Charles Henry Baker (1848-?), a horticulturist from Pennsylvania and Orange County, Florida.

Finally, the two names most associated with the grasses are A.S. Hitchcock (1865-1935) and Agnes Chase (1868-1958). Hitchcock traveled extensively as an agrostologist and contributed more than 250 publications on grasses and other flora. His authoritative "Manual of the Grasses of the United States" was published in 1935. Agnes Chase also did extensive field and herbarium work and contributed much to the Hitchcock manual. Chase was responsible for the revisions of the grass manual published in 1950. Ironically, only one species of grass bears Hitchcock's name, and that is cottontop, *Trichachne hitchcockii*, a Texas and Mexico species. Agnes Chase is not remembered at all in a grass genus or species name.