

# BLUE-EYED GRASS

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Grass with eyes you say? Nonsense! Don't be silly! Next thing I know you will be telling me that we have plants with toes, hair and whiskers too! But it's true! And their eyes even sparkle with a hint of yellow in the centre. Come for a walk with me around my garden or through the prairie in the spring and we are sure to find some of these blue-eyed beauties gazing up at us as we walk by.

## DESCRIPTION

Blue-Eyed Grass *Sisyrinchium montanum* can be a shy retiring plant at times. They are small perennials only 10-30 cm tall (4-12"), with narrow leaves to 3mm wide (1/8"). They start opening their eyes in early June and continue to look around all through June. But you have to be a morning person. Sometimes I have gone to photograph these pretty blue eyes in the afternoon only to find that they have already closed their eyes for the day. And just try to find them when their eyes are closed! Their medium green, grass-like leaves fade into the background and mingle shyly with all the prairie grasses around them.

Each pretty blue eye sheds a tear when it is finished blooming in the form of a small round seed capsule filled with tiny black seeds. Perhaps they are tears of happiness or perhaps they are tears of sorrow. We can only speculate.

This plant is also known as Star Grass by some people because the flowers are distinctly star shaped. Blue-Eyed Grass is actually not a true grass but a member of the Iris family, closely related to Blue Flag or Wild Iris *Iris versicolor*.

## NATIVE HABITAT

Blue Eyed Grass is a native perennial that grows in open meadows all across Canada except Nunavet. It also grows in Midwestern and North Eastern U.S. I have seen it growing in a field NW of Winnipeg along with Crocus and Three Flowered Avens. John Morgan also reported seeing a hillside covered with blooming plants in the sandy Carberry Hills of Manitoba.

## CULTURE

I got my start growing Blue-eyed Grass with the help of some neighbourhood birds, I suspect. I did not have a seed source until I found some plants growing right under my nose in my very own garden. I certainly didn't plant them so they must have started from seed dropped by the birds.

This is a plant that loves full sun and medium to moist soil. It does well in sandy soil too with reasonable rainfall. It thrives in my garden in a well drained site of heavy clay mixed with compost and sand. Whether in the wild or in a garden setting, it self seeds fairly easily but never to the point of being a pest.

In the garden Blue-Eyed Grass can be planted in sunny flower beds, rock gardens or mixed with other prairie wildflowers and grasses for a prairie meadow. It does well with other small plants such as Pussy Toes, Three Flowered Avenas, Purple Prairie Clover, Upland White Aster, June Grass and Side Oats Gramma Grass. This combination gives a succession of bloom from spring until fall.

The plants can be established either by direct seeding into the garden in October or by setting out plants. Fall seeding naturally stratifies the seed and allows it to begin germination in spring when the weather is still very cool. Plants can be set out in the garden in spring as soon as the danger of frost is past or in summer. They should bloom the second year from seed. If you wish to grow your own transplants from seed indoors, mix the seed with damp sand, peat or vermiculite and stratify in a fridge or cold room for 6 weeks. After stratifying, seed the trays and germinate under lights at cool temperatures of 2-8 degrees C (35-45 degrees F). Normal room temperatures will not work. It is difficult to provide these conditions for germination in a home so it is often easier to seed the trays outside in summer, leave them outside for the winter and allow them to germinate in their own time in spring as they start to thaw out. You just need to remember to water them outside in spring.

Blue-Eyed Grass is not only a popular and easy to grow wildflower for our gardens but the birds like to eat the seeds too. And it adds a touch of whimsy to the garden. Oh, and about those other plants with toes, and hair and whiskers – You know them don't you? Pussy Toes, Hair Grass, and Grandfather's Whiskers (Three Flowered Avenas). Try a whimsical theme and plant a face in your garden! See article entitled "A Garden of Smiles".

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