

# Canada wildrye (*Elymus canadensis*)

**Family: Grass**  
**(Poaceae)**

**DESCRIPTION:** Canada wildrye is a perennial, cool-season grass of prairies, riparian habitats and open woodlands. It grows in loose to dense clumps 2 to 5 feet tall. In prairie settings, the large drooping, distinctive spikes are discernible from a distance. *Elymus* comes from the Greek word, elyo, which means “rolled up” and refers to the grain being tightly enclosed in the floral scales.

**USES:** Quick to establish, Canada wildrye is common in habitat and soil stabilization plantings. Often plentiful in early prairie restorations, its abundance decreases as other species become established. It provides cover for a variety of wildlife and is fair to good forage for livestock, though it decreases under grazing pressure.

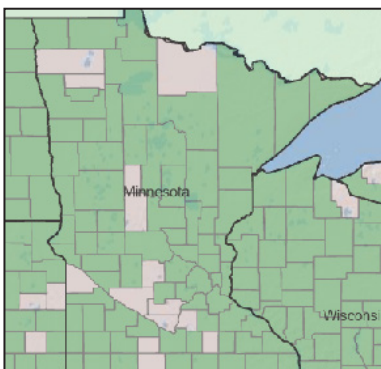
**REFERENCES:**

[USDA-Forest Service](#)

[NRCS Plant Guide](#)

[Utah State University](#)

The Tallgrass Restoration Handbook;  
S. Packard, C. Mutel



**Range Map Credit:** NRCS Plants Database



**Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

## Planting Recommendations

Canada wildrye can handle full sun or partial shade and grows well in many soil types including poor soils. Its deep roots allow it to tolerate drought and help stabilize streambanks. An attractive addition to gardens, Canada wildrye can replace non-native ornamental grasses. It is not aggressive and will not overtake a garden as some non-native ornamentals can. The grass pairs well with other tallgrass prairie species such as blazing stars, Culver’s root, New England aster and bee

balm. Seeds benefit from cold stratification. It is best to plant in the fall to allow seeds to naturally stratify under the snow. Spring-planted seeds can be cold-and-moist stratified for 60 days in a refrigerator. Soil contact is important when sowing seeds, so avoid planting over heavy litter. Raking seed into the soil produces better results, but seeds will also grow if spread on the soil surface. Seed is readily available commercially.

**Developed by Rhett Johnson**, a prairie private lands specialist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Scientific and Natural Areas Program



**STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS:**  
FACU

**ID:** The inflorescence is a two-sided spike, 2.5 to 8 inches long, about 1 to 2.5 inches wide, arching to somewhat drooping, with two to three spikelets per node. Spikelets have three to five florets. The lemmas are a third-to-half-inch long with half-inch to 1.5-inch bristle-like appendages at the tips, which bend outward at maturity. Leaf blades are up to a half-inch wide; sheaths are open and often have auricles (small ear-like appendages at the base of the leaf blade).

**SIMILAR SPECIES:**

Arching spikes set Canada wildrye apart from the eight other native wildrye species in Minnesota. Similar species have either erect spikes or very drooping spikes, or have one to three florets compared with Canada wildrye’s three to five florets. Some wildrye species can be difficult to identify, and they can hybridize. Canada wildrye is the species most likely to grow in native prairies.