

Washington Conservation District Plant of the Week – Winter 2008-9

By Jyneen Thatcher

Round-headed bushclover (Feb. 23, 2009)



Round-headed bushclover (*Lespedeza capitata*) is a plant that is highly visible in the winter and early spring, but rarely noticed during the growing season. Not to be confused with the prairie bushclover (*L. leptostachya*) which is a State endangered and Federally threatened species, round-headed bushclover is resilient- a survivor in old fields that contain a few remnant prairie species. It is a legume, with the typical three-leaves, but usually grows as a single stalk (sometimes it forks at

the top, and sometimes it grows as a cluster of stalks. The flower head is shaped like a red clover, only it's directly along the stem, and predominantly green with a very small white flower that has a very short bloom time. Then the flower fades into brown, and eventually the entire flower head turns dark brown and persists until the next summer.

The winter photo was taken in William A. O'Brien State Park, in one of the restored prairie sites; the summer view is the un-restored old-field/degraded prairie at Big Marine Park Reserve.



Indian Grass (Feb. 19, 2009)



This past weekend, I watched a made-for-TV movie that had a minor sub-plot involving a garden club. In one scene, a person brought a potted, green-leaf woody plant to a club meeting, looking for advice on care. The club chairperson commented on what an interesting plant:

she didn't know what it was but it looked like a hybrid between *Sorghastrum nutans* and (xxx). I was so agitated (you know how I get) that I didn't hear the second definitely disagreed with the hybrid with Indiangrass.

species, but I plant being a



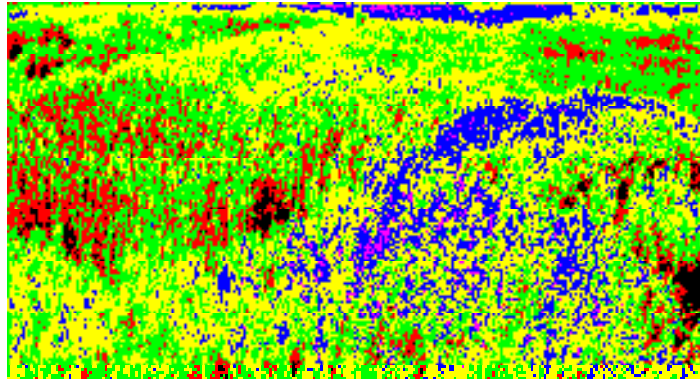
Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) is a native tallgrass prairie grass, with a long, velvety seed head of shiny copper and gold coloring. The flower and seedhead typically is evident around here from mid-August into October, with the stems growing from 3-6 feet tall. Each individual seed is hard, but sleek, and the awns line up unidirectionally, so it is very soft to brush against. The

seeds tend to fall off in late fall, so they aren't evident through the winter, but they harvest easily when they are ripe. The plant is highly nutritious as a forage grass for horses, cattle, and bison, as well as for birds and small mammals.

The photos attached show a patch of native prairie near Benson Minnesota, taken on a field day in August 2008, and a close-up of a seedhead in my restoration effort.

Phragmites (Nov. 17, 2008)

Both native and non-native varieties of phragmites (frag-my-teese) grow in wetlands in Washington County. The native variety has a smooth, shiny stem that is red to light brown at the base. Leaves are yellowish green and the stems are relatively spread out.



The non-native variety, in contrast, forms dense patches in wetlands. Stems are tan colored with dark greenish grey leaves.