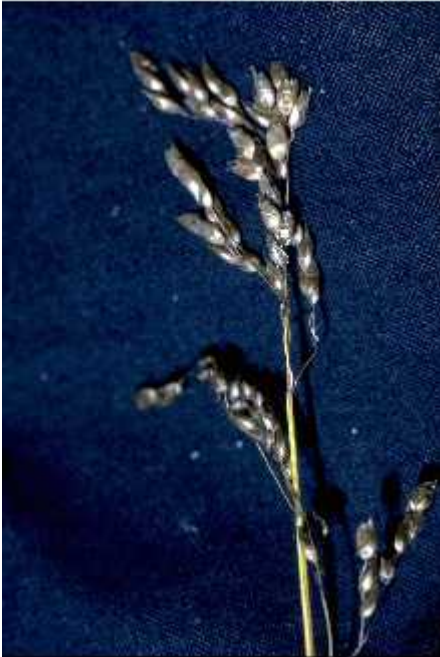


## SWEETGRASS

*Hierochloë odorata* (L.) Beauv.

Plant Symbol = HIOD

Contributed By: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center & Montana Plant Materials Center



Robert Mohlenbrock  
USDA NRCS 1992. Western wetland flora

### Alternate Names

Vanilla grass, holy grass, Seneca grass, alpine sweetgrass

### Uses

**Caution:** Coumarin, a natural anticoagulant, gives sweetgrass its characteristic sweet smell (Lewis 1977). It has potentially toxic properties and can cause liver injury and hemorrhages. Research has shown coumarin and related compounds to be effective in reducing high-protein edemas, especially lymphodema (Leung 1980).

**Ethnobotanic:** Sweetgrass was and still is used ceremonially through burning the dried and braided grass stems for an incense or smudge. The fragrant smoke is used for purification and to carry prayers to the Great Spirit. *Hierochloë* literally translates from Greek as sacred (hieros) and grass (chloë) or “holy

grass” (Hitchcock et al. 1973). Indian people call sweetgrass the “grass that never dies.” Even when it is cut, it retains its fragrance and spirit (Youngbuck pers. comm. 1999). Today, sweetgrass is used intertribally throughout the country. Sweetgrass was used ceremonially by many tribes, including the Omaha, Ponca, Kiowa, Dakota, Lakota, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Pawnee, and Winnebago (Jordan 1965, Moerman 1986). The Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Lakota use sweetgrass in the Sun Dance (Kindscher 1992, Hart 1976). Sweetgrass symbolizes life’s growth for the Cheyenne (*Ibid.*).

Sweetgrass was the most popular perfumery of the Blackfeet, who braided it and kept it with their clothes like a sachet or carried it in small bags (M<sup>c</sup>Clintock 1909). The Cheyenne mixed sweetgrass with pineapple weed (*Matricaria matricarioides*) to use as a perfume (Hart 1976). The Thompson Indians used an infusion of the plant as a wash for the hair and body (Moerman 1986). The Blackfeet and the Gros Ventre used sweetgrass as a hair rinse to achieve a lustrous shine (Hart 1976).

Blackfeet women made a tea from sweetgrass that was drunk to stop vaginal bleeding after birth and to expel the placenta (Hellsen 1974). Women burned sweetgrass braids after their moon time to finish the cleansing. Blackfeet men drank sweetgrass tea to treat venereal infections. Both sexes drank a tea from this plant to treat coughs and sore throats. Windburn and chapping were treated through an infusion of sweetgrass stems soaked in water or a salve of sweetgrass water and grease. The sweetgrass water was also used as an eyewash. Sweetgrass was mixed with seeds of meadow rue (*Thalictrum occidentale*) to make a tea to clear congested nasal passages (Kindscher 1992). The Karok of northern California used an infusion of sweetgrass to treat women who had suffered a miscarriage (Strike 1994). Pregnant women drank this infusion to arrest fetus growth. The Karok also fed sweetgrass to sick dogs.

Among the Chippewa, sweetgrass was used as an incense or smudge in ceremony, as a spiritual medicine, and in basketweaving (Densmore 1974). The use of incense is more characteristic of the Plains Indians than of the Algonquian tribes (*Ibid.*). According to Densmore, “Men would smudge before hunting to purify body and spirit. Medicine men kept sweetgrass in the bag with their medicinal roots and herbs. Strands of sweetgrass were made into coiled







