Florida Native Plant Society

Native Plant Owners Manual

Muhlenbergia capillaris – Muhly Grass

Mark Hutchinson
Putting things in perspective

All seasonal references are applicable to the eastern panhandle of Hernando County where the plants portrayed in this presentation grow. This area happens to be a cold spot in central Florida due to the Brooksville Ridge and approximates a Hardiness Zone of 8a or 8b, average annual low temperatures ranging between 10 and 20 °F.

Any reference to medicinal or culinary use of plants or plant parts should in no way be considered an endorsement by the Florida Native Plant Society of any sort of experimentation or consumptive use.

Please do not attempt to rescue any native plants without first reviewing the [FNPS Policy on Transplanting Native Plants](#).

Special thanks to Lucille Lane, Shirley Denton, Kari Ruder and Brooke Martin.
Muhly Grass
Grass family
Muhlenbergia capillaris
What’s in a Name?

Biological Classification – Tree of Life

Where does this plant grow?
  • In North America
  • In Florida

What this plant needs to -
  • Thrive
  • Propagate
  • Live a long life

Life Cycle

References
Muhly grass, pink muhly, gulf muhly, hair grass, Texas muhly grass, Florida muhly grass, mist grass, hair-awn muhly, long-awned smokegrass

*Muhlenbergia* (mew - len - BERG - gee - uh)


*capillaris* (kap – ill – AIR - iss)

From the Latin ‘capillus’, meaning having hair, or hair like.
Biological and Genetic Relationships

*Muhlenbergia capillaris* (Lam.) Trin. – hairawn muhly

*Muhlenbergia* Schreb. - muhly

**Poaceae** (grasses)

- Joinvilleaceae
- Restionaceae
- Flagellariaceae
- Typhaceae
- Cyperaceae
- Eriocaulaceae
- Rapateaceae
- Bromeliaceae

Each species is a leaf on the Tree of Life. Its genetic connections can be explored by following the branches (red line), towards the roots of life.
(Individual species and genus denoted by italics)
Link to the University of Arizona’s [Tree of Life](http://www.arizona.edu).
Species Distribution in the United States

Muhly grass, native to North America, is endemic to the southeastern United States, Mexico, and Guatemala. In the U.S. its growing range extends from Texas north into Kansas, then extends east-northeast as far as New York and Massachusetts, then south along the Atlantic seaboard to Florida.

(For specific distribution within any of the shaded areas go to the USDA link provided on the reference page, and click the shaded area of interest.)
• The USDA, NRCS, lists a total of 70 species of the genus *Muhlenbergia* Schreb. throughout North America.

• The Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants lists five species of this genus occurring in Florida, all native.

Robert K. Godfrey Herbarium
FSU #202881 Wakulla County, 9/18/2008
Species Distribution within Florida

- Muhly Grass, a perennial grass, is *vouchered in approximately thirty-seven counties in Florida, favoring the Gulf and Atlantic coast.

- *Muhlenbergia capillaris* is a very adaptable species found from marsh areas to uplands pine forest.

(*vouchered – indicates that a fully documented dried specimen has been deposited in an approved herbarium)*
Plant Structure and Life Cycle

When *Muhlenbergia capillaris* first emerges it can be easy to miss. The delicate, glossy, dark-green narrow leaves of this perennial grass can easily disappear.

The seed often germinate in cracks and crevices. In sidewalks and paved surfaces of urban areas and rock fissures of uplands habitat.
Muhly Grass has a fibrous root system adept at surviving wild fire.

Following winter, the dead and dried, fine narrow leafs of Hair Grass are excellent kindle for fast moving wild fire. Burning in the early spring enhances flower production in the fall and winter, and also aides in regeneration later in the spring and summer.
The unbranched, wire-like stem and leaves of Pink Muhly tend towards dense tufts of growth with leaves growing as long as forty inches.

This grass is quite adaptable, it thrives in a wide variety of soils, poor to rich, is drought tolerant, yet can also handle flooding well. A very attractive addition to any native landscape.
In the fall and winter *Muhlenbergia capillaris* demonstrates how it received one of its common names - Pink Muhly Grass. Very fine branched seed heads, half as long as the entire plant develop in a feathery deep pink hue. This display comes about just as many other plants are losing their colors and getting ready for a winter nap.
Growing Conditions

- *Muhlenbergia capillaris* prefers direct sun to slight shade
- Pink Muhly will grow in many soils, sandy to marly and is somewhat salt tolerant
- Medium to slightly acid soil – 5.8 to 6.8 pH
- Good drought tolerance, also flood tolerant
- Hardiness: USDA Zone 5a: to -28.8 °C (-20°F) to USDA Zone 10b: above 1.7 °C (35 °F)
- Flowering and seed production occur from late summer through late fall
- Height: 36 - 40 inches (90 - 100 cm.)
Seed Collection and Propagation

*Muhlenbergia capillaris*, like most grasses, reproduces sexually, with the wind being the assumed pollinator. Brown seeds are produced in the diffuse panicle with very fine capillary branches that form the inflorescence, or flower head. The seeds are elliptic and very small, about 2 to 2.5 millimeters long. When adequately dried the seeds can be collected using a comb, leaving the misty flower head primarily intact.
Maintenance and Care

Once winter is over and spring is near, there will be an accumulation of dead and dried leaves. An attractive way to remove this build-up and get Muhly Grass ready for the growing season is to loop a cord around the plant pulling the leaves into a pony tail sticking straight up. Then using a sharp set of shears cut the pony tail off parallel with the ground. When the cord is removed, the plant will spring into a very neat and attractive half sphere.

Another method for removing dead foliage is to burn the plant in early spring, as would occur with natural wild fire. For safety this can be done by placing an open ended 55 gallon drum over the plant before torching it.
Presentation References

• Biological and genetic relationships
  University of Arizona Tree of Life

• North American distribution
  USDA - Natural Resource Conservation Service

• Florida distribution
  Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants

• Herbarium specimen
  Robert K. Godfrey Herbarium FSU
Presentation References (cont.)

• Growing conditions & general information
  • New England Wild Flower Society
  • Wildflower Center, UTA
  • Floridata

• FNPS – Natives for Landscaping
  FNPS.org This Link will take you to the profile for this plant on the FNPS website

  • Florida Plants by zone and habitat, use your county name or zip-code to see native habitat classifications and appropriate plants.
• For more in-depth study:

