

# WHAT WILL YOU PLANT?

## USDA PLANTS database an online landowner resource

*Kristina Hufford*

Interested in controlling erosion and improving plant cover on your property?

Need plants adapted to challenging soils and climate conditions?

Or maybe you want to identify and control noxious and invasive weeds?

The online USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) PLANTS database provides information about rangeland species and common cultivars, many of which are available through local nurseries and seed companies.

The PLANTS database offers many options. If you know what you want to plant, but would like to learn more, detailed information for individual species is found by searching for either the scientific or common name.

For example, a search for the common name “western wheatgrass” will open a page listing the scientific name *Pascopyrum smithii*, including a distribution map and general information such as:

- 1) Growth habit including shrubs, grasses, and forbs,
- 2) Whether the species is native or introduced to North America, and
- 3) Links for fact sheets and plant guides (which are available for some plants).

### Example Search

Plant guides are particularly helpful to determine the potential uses of species of interest. Guides also provide information about the correct hardiness

zones and soils for planting and list cultivated varieties available for sale.

Plant guides can be invaluable resources for decision making when seeding a site. In this example, western wheatgrass is described as an important erosion control and reclamation grass species that competes well with invasive weeds. It’s also preferred forage for wildlife and livestock and best if planted in 10- to 20-inch annual rainfall zones.

If you’re uncertain about planting choices, but aware of your needs or the challenges at the property, there is the advanced search option. Your choices include species’ geographic distribution, taxonomic classification, growth habit, legal status (such as noxious or

By Sheri Hagwood, Bureau of Land Management, United States, ID, Bureau of Land Management Jarbidge Resource Area. February 7, 2007. (USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database: *Pascopyrum smithii*) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The screenshot shows a search box with the text "western wheatgrass" entered. Below the search box is a dropdown menu set to "Common Name" and a "Go" button. Below the search box are three links: "State Search", "Advanced Search", and "Search Help".

The screenshot shows a search box with the text "Pascopyrum smithii" entered. Below the search box is a dropdown menu set to "Scientific Name" and a "Go" button. Below the search box are three links: "State Search", "Advanced Search", and "Search Help".

threatened), and a large suite of plant characteristics.

Selecting possible characteristics can narrow the number of species you might plant on a property. If the goal is to identify salt tolerant plants, select those options. Clicking on any species in the list will bring you back to the specie's webpage with general information and fact sheets or plant guides, if available. All species' descriptions include the scientific and common names, which are useful for placing orders at local nurseries and seed companies.

For plant enthusiasts, other options available in the database include lists of all known species by state and an immense photo gallery to assist with plant identification. Those lists include threatened and endangered species important for conservation planning and plants of cultural significance to Native Americans and early pioneers.

## Noxious Weeds, Invasive Weeds Information

Land managers may be interested in noxious weeds and invasive species. These lists vary by state and provide information about noxious plants in your area that can injure crops or livestock, or invasive weeds that are difficult to control once established.

Cheatgrass or downy brome (*Bromus tectorum*) is a common invasive weed in Wyoming. Cheatgrass was accidentally introduced to North America in the 1800s and is native to Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. Cheatgrass has spread rapidly throughout the western United States, and its annual growth form results in high fuel loads wherever the plants occur in large numbers.

Cheatgrass control is a high priority for anyone who wants to minimize the risk for frequent wildfires and

conserve native plant communities and the pollinators and wildlife dependent upon them.

The database is routinely updated and complements local resources for landowners and growers. For further information, check out:

- "Rangeland Plants: Wyoming Tough" guide from the University of Wyoming about Wyoming

native plants

- "Plants with Altitude," a guide to help select regionally native plants for landscapes

Links to both resources and many more are on the Barnyards & Backyards "Landscaping" and "Forage/Pastures/Grazing" [bit.ly/foragepasturegraze](http://bit.ly/foragepasturegraze) pages.

**Kristina Hufford** is the restoration ecologist and extension specialist in the Department of Ecosystem Science and Management at the University of Wyoming. She can be reached at (307) 766-5587 or [khufford@uwyo.edu](mailto:khufford@uwyo.edu).



## THE 'GO-TO' PLACE FOR EXTENSIVE, ACCURATE INFORMATION

In addition to resources listed in this article, the USDA PLANTS database <http://plants.usda.gov> has search functions to identify alternative and cover crops of interest to agricultural producers and links to related tools, such as the ecological site information system commonly used by federal and state land managers.

The database is a jumping point to learn more about resources and publications available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency created in 1935 during the Dust Bowl and originally named the Soil Conservation Service. The NRCS remains active in conservation many years later, and online resources are well worth investigation.

The database is routinely updated and complements local resources for landowners and growers.