

Native Plant Development at the Alberta Research Council

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Public awareness about the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity has led to an increasing interest in the use of native plants. Land management agencies now recommend the use of native plants in reclamation and restoration projects. Native species are desirable for aesthetics, low maintenance alternatives and are useful in rangelands for grazing both by livestock and wild animals. Native grasses can be substituted in many applications as erosion control and rangeland improvement. The use of native grasses in conjunction with native legumes can improve erosion control by taking advantage of the taproots of legume species. Native grasses have high nutritional quality and good palatability and by planting a mix of several species, it is possible to provide suitable forage throughout the grazing season. Seed sourcing has often been an obstacle in the past. There are now more species available on the market. The Alberta Research Council (ARC) is one of the few organizations that focus on the development of adapted native grasses, forbs and legumes for the commercial market. Our program objectives are to: Collect and maintain as much variability as practically possible in native plants; Test collected native plant materials; Develop technologies (seeding techniques, weed control, seed processing) to propagate and cultivate these native species under field conditions; Determine geographic adaptation of these native plant materials in co-operative trials; Evaluate these plant materials in native seed mixes under different reclamation conditions, in different environments; Compare the plant materials to common seeds or those already on the market, but from a different origin; Release the plant materials as named varieties to the seed industry for commercial production. To date, the ARC has released 14 varieties of native grasses, resulting in superior grass varieties now commercially available.