

# IDENTIFYING SPARTINA in PUGET SOUND & GEORGIA STRAIT



On this field guide you will find descriptions and photographs of the four *Spartina* species found in Puget Sound and Georgia Strait. Keep in mind that *S. anglica* is by far the most abundant. This guide also provides descriptions and photographs of several native species that are commonly confused with *Spartina* species.



All species of *Spartina* may be verified by the presence of fine, straight hairs at the ridged joint between the leaf blade and the stem (the ligule). To confirm, pull the leaf blade away from the stem to reveal these hairs. Other members of the grasses will have a thin membrane, a hairless band, or no band at all.

## IDENTIFYING SPARTINA:

*Spartina anglica* (English cordgrass) is most abundant in Island, Skagit, and Snohomish counties, but has been found in San Juan, King, Kitsap, and Jefferson counties (WSDA, 2003).

- **General:** A perennial, salt-tolerant grass. Bright green to grayish green (fig. 1).

- **Appearance:** highly variable depending upon invaded habitat type. Round, hollow stems up to 1.5m in height. Leaf blades 5-40cm long and 5-12mm wide. Distinguishing feature of *S. anglica* is strong 45 to 90 degree angle of the leaf blade to the stem (fig. 2).

- **Growth pattern:** growth in circular clumps (fig. 3), called clones, that may coalesce into solid or patchy meadows. Generally dormant from November to March.

- **Reproduction:** tall, often reddish stems with flower heads on mature plants from June through September, consisting of 2-12 'spikes' that fan out slightly (fig 4). Mature seeds drop in late summer and early fall. Germination occurs in spring (March-April).



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fig. 1



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fig. 2



Fisheries & Oceans Canada

fig. 3



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fig. 4



WDNR

*Spartina densiflora* (dense-flowered cordgrass) has been found in Race Lagoon on Whidbey Island (WSDA, 2003). Grayish in color, stems up to 1.5m tall. Lacks rhizomes, therefore tends to grow in tufts. The leaf blades are 12-43 cm long, narrow with curled in edges. Flowers from April to July.



F. Grevstad, UW

*Spartina alterniflora* (Atlantic smooth cordgrass) has been found in Padilla Bay in Skagit County, Clallam and Jefferson Counties (WSDA, 2003). Tall, reaches heights up to 2 m. Leaf blades 20 to 55cm long and protrude from the stem at a slight angle. Base of shoots are often a deep red color. Flowers from late July through October.



WSDA

*Spartina patens* (saltmeadow cordgrass) has been found in Dosewallips State Park in Hood Canal (WSDA, 2000). Thin flexible stems up to 1.2 m in height. Leaves 10 to 50 cm long, thin and rolled inward, appearing round. Generally found in high intertidal saltmarshes.

These 5 species are commonly confused with *Spartina*: The stem of a plant can help you quickly differentiate between grasses, sedges, and rushes. Feel the stem and use this rhyme... 'Sedges have edges, rushes are round, and grasses have holes all the way to the ground'.



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*Distichlis spicata* (seashore saltgrass) is a native species of marsh grass found in salt marshes throughout the Puget Sound. Although it is a grass, it has a solid (not hollow) stem. When mature, this grass is much smaller than *Spartina*, reaching only 10 to 40 cm tall. The ligule has a ridge with very small, dense bristles.



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*Scirpus maritimus* (seacoast bulrush) is a native sedge. The stem is distinctly triangular in appearance and feel. It is a very tall plant, reaching up to 2m in height. The leaves are bright green to yellowish green. It is found in low salinity salt marshes.



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*Plantago maritima* (seaside plantain) is a rather small plant, only reaching 5 to 25cm tall. It is a taprooted perennial with numerous, fleshy leaves protruding from the base. A single plant will send up several flowering stems that are slightly taller than the leaves. The flower heads often appear hairy. This plant can be found in marshes, sand and cobble beaches and even popping up in crevices of large rocks.



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*Leymus mollis* (dunegrass): This native grass also reaches heights up to 1.5m. The leaf blades are 6-15mm wide, generally wider than *Spartina*. The plant often has a distinctive bluish tint. The ligule of dunegrass has a short, thin membrane. It grows higher in the intertidal than *Spartina* (with the exception of *S. patens*) and is found along the upper fringe of marshes, sand and cobble beaches.



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*Triglochin maritimum* (seaside arrow-grass), despite its name is not a grass. It can reach heights from 20 to 120cm tall, which is often why it is confused with *Spartina*. The leaves of this plant all extend up from a rhizome base, and are fleshy. The flowering stem is often quite taller than the leaves. Both the flowers and seeds are bead-like in appearance. It can be found in marshes and in the higher intertidal areas of mudflats and cobble beaches.

If you think you have discovered *Spartina* please call your local Noxious Weed Control Board.

- WA Noxious Weeds Control Board: (360) 902-2082
- Clallam County (360) 417-2442
- Jefferson County (360) 379-56102
- King County (206) 296-0290
- Kitsap County (360) 307-4242
- Island County (360) 240-5597
- San Juan County (360) 376-3499
- Skagit County (360) 336-9430
- Snohomish County (360) 862-7523
- Whatcom County (360) 354-3990
- WA Department of Agriculture (360) 902-1923
- British Columbia (Vancouver Aquarium) (604) 659 3503



MAIN OFFICE  
911 Western Avenue, Suite 580  
Seattle, WA 98104  
tel: (206) 382 7007  
fax: (206) 382 7006  
people@pugetsound.org

NORTH SOUND  
407 Main Street, Suite 201  
Mount Vernon, WA 98271  
tel: (360) 336 1937  
fax: (360) 336 5422  
northsound@pugetsound.org

SOUTH SOUND  
1063 Capitol Way South, Suite 206  
Olympia, WA 98501  
tel: (360) 754 9177  
fax: (360) 534 9371  
southsound@pugetsound.org

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