Field Guide to the Identification of Cogongrass

With comparisons to other commonly found grass species in the Southeast

Alabama Cogongrass State Task Force
A Coalition of Natural Resource Agencies and Organizations
Cogongrass (*Imperata cylindrica*) is an aggressive invader of natural and disturbed areas throughout the Southeast. It disrupts ecosystem functions, reduces wildlife habitat, decreases tree seedling growth and establishment success, and alters fire regimes and intensity. Recognizing the presence of cogongrass is necessary before beginning any management activities. While other species may look similar, cogongrass has a unique combination of characteristics that make field identification possible. This field guide describes and illustrates these characteristics and compares them to other grass species commonly found in similar habitats. Easy-to-understand terminology is used when possible, and definitions for technical terms are provided below. Cogongrass is a Federal Noxious Weed and any infestation must be identified by the appropriate state or federal authority. If you think you have cogongrass on your land, please contact your local Alabama Forestry Commission office. For more information on cogongrass ecology and control, visit [www.forestry.alabama.gov](http://www.forestry.alabama.gov) or [www.cogongrass.org](http://www.cogongrass.org).

**Scientific Names of Compared Species:**
- Vasey grass (*Paspalum urvillei*)
- Johnsongrass (*Sorghum halepense*)
- Silver beardgrass (*Bothriochloa laguroides*)
- Broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*)

**Definitions:**
- **Flower/seed head** – entire group of flowers or seeds attached to flower stalk
- **Leaf sheath** – lower portion of the leaf which encloses the stem
- **Ligule** - Small projection at the base of a leaf blade
- **Collar region** – junction of the leaf blade with the leaf sheath
- **Rhizome** – Underground stem which often roots at nodes (often thicker and more fleshy than roots)

**Citation**

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[www.forestry.alabama.gov](http://www.forestry.alabama.gov)

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Key Identification Features of Cogongrass

Flower/seed head
- Cylindrical in shape
- 2-8 inches in length (total flower or seed head)
- Silvery white in color
- Light fluffy dandelion-like seeds
- Blooms from late March to mid June
  (flower timing depends somewhat on local climate)

Leaves
- Blades up to 6 feet long
- About 1 inch wide
- Whitish, prominent midrib that is often off center
- Margins finely serrate
- Some leaves are very erect, but some may droop or lie flat
- Often light yellowish-green in color
- Could have a reddish cast in fall/winter or brown after frost or freeze
Key Identification Features of Cogongrass

Leaf collar/Ligule
- Ligule is a thin-fringed membrane
- Leaf sheaths overlapping, giving the plant a round appearance
- Hairy (the ligule is the most hairy part of the plant, the plant base may also be somewhat hairy)

Plant Base
- No apparent stem
- Leaves appear to arise directly from or close to the ground
- Overlapping sheaths give a rounded appearance to the plant base
- All vegetation doesn’t arise from one dense clump; instead the plants are more spread out
- Light-green to yellowish in color, or could be reddish
- Often a lot of thatch around base
Key Identification Features of Cogongrass

**Rhizome/Roots**
- Dense mat
- Many sharp points
- Covered in flaky scales
- Bright white under scales
- Strongly segmented

![Rhizomes with scales removed (top) and intact (bottom)]

**Whole Plant**
- Densely growing patches
- Tall grass (up to 6 feet, averaging 3-4 feet)
- Circular infestations
- Plants often turn brown in winter (at least partially, but may depend on local climate)
Cogongrass Infestation Identification

Forest - Flowering

Forest - Non-flowering

Forest - Dormant Season

Utility Rights-of-way
Cogongrass Infestation Identification

Circular - Flowering

Circular - Non-flowering

Open Area - Sparse Flowering

Open Area - Dense Flowering

Roadside - Flowering

Roadside - Non-flowering

Aerial View
Cogongrass - Flower and Seed Head Comparison

Flower/seed head
- Cylindrical in shape
- 2-8 inches in length (total flower or seed head)
- Silvery white in color
- Light fluffy dandelion-like seeds
- Blooms from late March to mid June (flower timing depends somewhat on local climate)
Vasey Grass
Flower/seed head not fluffy, but loosely branched and spreading.

Silver Beardgrass
Very similar in looks, but often somewhat branched and blooms later in the year (June-August).

Broomsedge
Flower/seed head is thin and sparsely flowered, blooms late summer.

Johnsongrass
Flower/seed head not-fluffy, but loosely branched and spreading.
Leaves
- Blades up to 6 feet long
- About 1 inch wide
- Whitish, prominent midrib that is often off center
- Margins finely serrate
- Some leaves are very erect, but some may droop or lie flat
- Often light yellowish-green in color
- Could have a reddish cast in fall/winter or brown after frost or freeze
**Vasey Grass**
Leaves arise from apparent stem, and serrations are not as obvious.

**Silver Beardgrass**
Leaves are not serrated and arise from an apparent stem. Midrib not as apparent.

**Broomsedge**
Leaves are thin and often curled, and arise from apparent stem.

**Johnsongrass**
Leaves wider than cogongrass, edges are not serrate.
Cogongrass - Leaf Collar and Ligule Comparison

Leaf collar/Ligule
- Ligule is a thin-fringed membrane
- Leaf sheaths overlapping, giving the plant a round appearance
- Hairy (the ligule is the most hairy part of the plant, the plant base may also be somewhat hairy)
**Vasey Grass**
Only membranous ligule is hairy, leaf collar flared, giving the region a less rounded look.

**Silver Beardgrass**
Collar region hairless except for ligule, which has sparse long hairs.

**Broomsedge**
Sheath is somewhat hairy, ligule is covered in numerous long thin hairs.

**Johnsongrass**
Smooth collar, not hairy except for a small white hair-patch behind ligule.
Cogongrass - Plant Base Comparison

Plant Base
- No apparent stem
- Leaves appear to arise directly from or close to the ground
- Overlapping sheaths give a rounded appearance to the plant base
- All vegetation doesn’t arise from one dense clump, instead the plants are more spread out
- Light-green to yellowish in color, or could be reddish
- Often a lot of thatch around base
Vasey Grass
Base thick and flattened, often with a reddish-purple color. Plant is very bunched in appearance.

Silver Beardgrass
Plant base has a strongly bunched appearance, with apparent stems.

Broomsedge
Plant base has a strongly bunched appearance, with very apparent stems.

Johnsongrass
Plant base also rounded, but very thick in comparison to cogongrass. Plant does not appear bunched.
Cogongrass - Rhizome and Root Comparison

Rhizome/Roots
- Dense mat
- Many sharp points
- Covered in flaky scales
- Bright white under scales
- Strongly segmented
Vasey Grass
Thin root system, not extensive and lacking thick, segmented rhizomes.

Silver Beardgrass
Root system fibrous, lacking rhizomes.

Broomsedge
Root system fibrous, lacking rhizomes.

Johnsongrass
Rhizome system not as extensive. Rhizomes lacking scaly coverings.
Cogongrass - Whole Plant Comparison

**Whole Plant**
- Densely growing patches
- Tall grass (up to 6 feet, averaging 3-4 feet)
- Circular infestations
- Plants often turn brown in winter (at least partially, but may depend on local climate)
Vasey Grass

Silver Beardgrass

Broomsedge

Johnsongrass
Leaves 1/2-1 inch wide

Leaves 1-6 feet long

Overlapping leaf sheaths

Stem not apparent
Leaves arise near base

New plants arise from sharp-tipped rhizomes