



## Ornamental Grasses

Here's a horticultural category that roughly translates as the quality "grass-like" and moves beyond the usual classification of genus, species and cultivar. Comprised mostly of the plants in the "true grass" botanical family, including bamboo (*Fargesia*, *Phyllostachys*), it leaves out turfgrass and most cereal grains. It adds in the sedges (*Carex*), rushes (*Juncus*) and some lesser known genera (*Acorus*, *Ophiopogon*, *Liriope*). A brief list follows. Due to their rapid establishment and longevity, however, most of these plants require taking the time to seriously plan before planting. Here are a few important factors to take into account:

### *make a plan*

- As you design your landscape, think of ornamental grasses in the same way you would use trees and shrubs. They will take a few years to reach their height and width and, once placed, are best not transplanted. Long-lived and getting better with every year, they will become an important architectural element in your garden: planning carefully will yield better results.
- Although they are one of the few plants that can look great both "lined up like soldiers" or as a specimen in the corner of a yard, ornamental grasses truly shine when combined with perennials, annuals, trees and shrubs, providing height, color, texture and movement as well as year-round interest with minimal maintenance.
- Most grasses will need at least six hours of sun, but there are options for shady areas as well. Evaluate carefully to avoid unhappy plants that are floppy without enough sun or scald with too much sun.
- Many grasses grow into large clumps, so prepare for their ultimate size with proper spacing. The empty spaces may be filled with annuals for the first two or three years in order to provide a full look.
- Some ornamental grasses are runners, spreading by rhizomes or stolons. Make sure they have enough room or allow them to make a dramatic statement in a large container.
- Consider bloom time and growth habits: cool-season grasses emerge early in spring and bloom at the beginning of summer and warm-season grasses emerge later and don't bloom until late summer or early fall.
- Ornamental grasses can play the same role as evergreen shrubs and trees with year-round interest, except for early spring when they've been cut back and haven't yet greened-up for the season. Consider interplanting spring blooming bulbs for a lovely April to May display and, when the weather warms up, the grasses will disguise the withering bulb foliage.
- Stars of the fall garden with feathery plumes and deepening color, grasses combine well with trees and shrubs known for their fall color such as Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*), willow-leaved bluestar (*Amsonia*), burning bush (*Aronia*), smokebush (*Cotinus*), plumbago (*Ceratostigma*), sweetspire (*Itea*), heavenly bamboo (*Nandina*), sedum, and sumac (*Rhus*).
- Grasses are a dynamic and low-maintenance choice around a water feature, especially those native to wet spots.
- Lastly, ornamental grasses, both perennial and annual are perfect centerpieces for containers, especially those that may be too vigorous to share space in a garden bed. Many perennial grasses are sufficiently cold-hardy to remain outdoors through the winter and they are a great choice for rooftop gardens where strong wind is an issue.

### *planting and care*

- Once you have selected your grass and decided on a plan, it's time to prepare the soil – the single most important aspect of having healthy ornamental grass.
- After digging the bed to a spade-depth (10-12"), amend the soil 50/50 with Dr. Earth Motherland or other organic compost and add sufficient Turface to aid drainage and the uptake of both water and nutrients.

- If you are not making a new bed, you should amend a good size area in the same way, about three times as wide as the plant.
- Place the grasses and other plants according to your plan and look at it from all angles to make sure you are satisfied.
- To ensure root establishment in your soil, loosen the roots away from the root ball before planting. Be forewarned: you may have to use a trowel or knife to slice through the roots on the sides and bottom – grasses are almost always rootbound!
- Each plant should have a hole as deep as its nursery pot and at least twice as wide. Set the plant slightly above grade.
- Fertilization is not necessary – highly fertile soils may result in overly vigorous, floppy grass
- Two to three inches of compost may be applied as a mulch to help keep roots moist and the soil temperature cooler. In subsequent seasons this compost mulch will provide all the nutrients needed.
- Newly planted ornamental grasses generally need at least one inch of water per week. If insufficient rain has fallen, check the soil around the grass and if it is dry at around three inches deep, provide supplemental water.
- Cut down ornamental grass to 6 - 8” in early March. As the clumps get bigger you may need more than clippers to do this!
- Grasses don’t need to be divided often – usually five to seven years is sufficient and only if they become overgrown or have died back in the center. Do this in spring before the new leaves have begun to grow.
- You will need to use an axe or a sharp garden spade to dig and divide the grass clump into smaller sections.
- Wash the soil off the healthy divisions and replant immediately, siting them to provide space for mature width.
- If you must move a grass clump while it is actively growing, cut it back by one-third before dividing or transplanting

### Grass-like Plants = Ornamental Grasses

Botanical Name	Common Name	Season	H x W	Comments
<i>Acorus gramineus</i>	Sweet Flag	Warm	6-12”x6-12”	wet/sun-part shade; great in pots
<i>Andropogon gerardii</i>	Big Blue Stem	Warm	4-6’x2-3’	MO native; dry/sun
<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>	Side Oats Grama	Warm	18-30”x18-24”	MO native; dry/sun; finch favorite
<i>Calamagrostis x acutiflora</i>	Feather Reed Grass	Cool	3-5’x1-2’	dry/sun-part shade; columnar
<i>Carex spp.</i>	Sedge	Evergreen	6-12”x12-18”	moist/sun-part shade; many variations
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	River Oats	Warm	2-3’x2-3’	MO native; wet/sun-part shade
<i>Cortaderia selloana</i>	Pampas Grass	Warm	8-10’x3-6’	Annual; moist/sun; huge panicles
<i>Eragrostis spp.</i>	Love Grass	Warm	1-2’x2-3’	dry/sun; delicate looking, very tough
<i>Fargesia</i>	Clumping Bamboo	Evergreen	6-8’x4-5’	moist/sun-part shade; many variations
<i>Festuca spp.</i>	Blue Fescue	Cool	9-12”x6-9”	dry/sun-part shade; protect from heat
<i>Hakonechloa</i>	Hakone Grass	Warm	9-14”x18-24”	moist/shade; spreads slowly
<i>Juncus spp.</i>	Rush	Warm	18-36”x18-24”	wet/sun-part shade; great in pots
<i>Leymus arenarius</i>	Blue Lyme Grass	Cool	2-3’ rhizomatic	dry/sun; control spread in container
<i>Liriope spp.</i>	Lilyturf	Evergreen	12-18”x9-12”	dry/sun-part shade; flowers in August
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Maiden Grass	Warm	4-9’x3-6’	dry /sun; many variations; sharp edges!
<i>Muhlenbergia spp.</i>	Muhly Grass	Warm	3-4’x2-3’	dry/sun; dramatic clouds of seedheads
<i>Nasella tenuissima</i>	Mexican Feather Grass	Cool	18-24”x18-24”	Annual; sun/dry; very fine-textured
<i>Ophiopogon spp.</i>	Mondo Grass	Evergreen	9-12”x9-12”	moist/sun-part shade; slow-growing
<i>Panicum spp.</i>	Switchgrass	Warm	3-6’x2-3’	MO native; moist/sun; airy seedheads
<i>Pennisetum spp.</i>	Fountain Grass	Warm	1-5’x2-5’	sun/dry; clumping; bottlebrush plumes
<i>Phyllostachys spp.</i>	Running Bamboo	Evergreen	12-18”x12-25’	moist/sun; control spread in container
<i>Saccharum ravennae</i>	Northern Pampas Grass	Warm	6-12’x4-6’	sun/dry; excellent specimen or screen
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	Little Bluestem	Warm	2-4’x1-2’	MO native; sun/dry; loose, branching
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	Indian Grass	Warm	2-6’x1-2’	MO native; dry/sun-part shade
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Prairie Dropseed	Warm	2-3’x2-3’	MO native; dry/sun; clumping