

Ornamental Grass

When we think of grass, we typically think of the type we mow, that covers the majority of our yard, or the type that we weed from our flower and vegetable beds. But a whole family of ornamental grasses exists that have a place in the landscape. There are low growing spreading forms, to large clumps with graceful blades. They are at home in any landscape, and are an easy and carefree addition.



Most grasses are at their peak in the fall, with an array of colorful seed heads. Grasses offer a diversity of color, form and texture to the landscape year-round, but really add interest for fall and winter. Grasses can even add sound to the garden in rustling foliage and dried seed heads. Most grasses perform best in full sun, although there are some shade lovers in the bunch. Given the variety of mature sizes, it is best to investigate the plant, before selecting one. Learn the eventual height and spread, to ensure you get exactly the type of grass you are looking for.

When we talk about ornamental grasses, we aren't limiting ourselves to strictly members of the grass or graminacea family. We're also including grasslike plants, including sedges, rushes and even some members of the lily family.

Choices

Growing grasses as ornamentals isn't new, but the variety of choices is. Many of us are familiar with, and have been growing, the giant pampas grass for years. And using grasses for fresh and dried flower arrangements, have been popular since Victorian times. These days there is a desire to have low maintenance landscapes, and naturalistic landscapes are becoming quite popular. We also are trying to branch out of spring only landscapes, and have interest for every season, so the search is on for additions to the fall and winter landscape. Enter grasses.

Divisions

Grasses can be divided into two major divisions -- those that clump, and those that run. Unless you are looking for erosion control, or need the ground covered quickly, you may want to avoid the runners. Running grasses spread by means of underground stems known as rhizomes, or above ground horizontal stems known as stolons. They can be invasive, and hard to keep contained. Clump formers are less competitive, but again, depending on variety, they can take up room in the garden over time. They blend in better in the typical landscape.

Size

Next consider size. There are upright, vertical forms, arching plumes or low mounding forms. There are giant forms reaching 12 feet or more which can be used as accent plants or screens, or wispy delicate forms for ground covers. And not all grasses are green -- and remember there are various shades of the color green itself. Some grasses are blue, varietated white or yellow, and some have outstanding red, purple or even black foliage. And consider their dormant

season color in shades of tan, as well as the color of the seed heads. One type, the Leather-leaf sedge is light brown year round.

Maintenance

Ornamental grasses are relatively low-maintenance. There are few pest problems, and most are fairly drought tolerant, although a few flourish in wet environments. They usually benefit from a shearing at appropriate times of the year -- for most grasses this is before growth begins in the spring.

Perennials and Annuals

While most of us are adding grasses to the landscape that are perennials, there are also some annual members of the family to look to for color and interest. These include the small cloud grass, *Agrostis nebulosa*, Big Quaking Grass, *Briza maxima*; Job's tears, *Coix lacryma-jobi*; Rabbit's tail grass, *Lagurus ovatus*; and my favorite the Purple Fountain Grass, *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Cupreum'.

If you are looking for small grasses in the landscape consider bulbous oat grass, a white and green variegated plant growing 12 to 18 inches in height. Side oats grama, is a 2 foot tall plant with an arching growth habit, that is very drought tolerant. And if moist soil is a problem, consider one of the ornamental sedges (no, not nutsedge). Leatherleaf sedge has coppery brown foliage year-round and is a great border plant. Japanese sedge has some interesting plant variegation and makes an attractive arching mound. Another neat plant is the dwarf blue fescue, *Festuca ovina* 'Glaucua'. It forms dense tufts of blueish green plants, that makes an interesting ground cover or low border to the garden. Bearskin fescue looks like a little green porcupine in the garden, with golden spikes forming in the center