



## Guide to Ornamental Grasses

Depending on your style, color preference and gardening needs, there are many ornamental grass varieties to choose from. Ornamental grasses are clump-forming, low-maintenance perennials. Once established in their new planting site, they will thrive for several years.

The versatility, adaptability and beauty of ornamental grasses make them perfect companion and counterpoint plants. The narrow foliage blades compliment bold, colorful perennials and broadleaf shrubs.



### Advantages and Possible uses of Ornamental Grasses

1. Low-maintenance and relatively easy to maintain.
2. Usually pest and disease free.
3. Winter interest and food source or refuge for birds.
4. Low-growing varieties can be used as ground cover.
5. Erosion control on a hillside.
6. Tall varieties can be used as a privacy screen.
7. Grow in containers for deck or patio interest.
8. Plant as part of a meadow or prairie to create a nature area.

### How and Where to Plant Ornamental Grasses

Most ornamental grasses are generally classified into cool-season and warm-season grasses. Cool-season grasses will begin growing in spring time when temperatures are still on the cool side, but above freezing, while warm-season grasses need warm temperatures to begin growing. We carry both types that are hardy for our area.

A majority of ornamental grasses prefer full sun to partial shade (4-6 hours of sunlight per day). If a grass requires full sun and it receives too much shade, you will notice the plant reaching for the light and eventually flopping over. There are varieties that can handle more shade such as **Hakone grass, Sedge, and Liriope**. The latter two are not technically grasses but they have the same characteristics and function for the landscape, so we have included them here.

Before planting, begin by enriching the soil with organic matter such as peat moss or compost. Ornamental grasses are not heavy feeders, so fertilizing is not generally necessary, but a good rich soil will give it a good base for which to grow.

Make sure you have factored in the full height of the grass you have selected for the planting site. Depending on the grass, some have flower/seed plumes that could add an extra foot once it is in bloom.

Dig a hole twice the width of the pot that your ornamental grass is growing in. Once you remove the plant from the pot, loosen the roots or score them with pruners or a knife to get them to begin growing

into the surrounding soil and not continue to grow in a circle. Set the plant in the hole so it will be growing at the same level it was in the pot. Shallow or deeper planting could cause problems. Back fill the soil removed from the planting hole and pat it firmly to remove any air pockets and water thoroughly.

Keep well watered the first year and in extended periods of drought. As with other perennials, they don't grow much the first year, but tend to take off and fill in more the second and third season.

### **When to Cut Back Old Stalks**

Trim entire plant to about 2-6 inches above the base of the plant in late winter or early spring. The birds that stay north in winter will benefit from the seed heads as a food source and the clumps of stalks can provide shelter. If you wait until spring to trim, just be sure to do it early before the new stems begin to grow. It's much harder to trim out dead stalks among the new growth.

### **When to Divide Ornamental Grass Clumps**

When grasses start to grow outward, leaving the center bare, you can dig out the clump, divide it and discard the dead core. Spring is the best season to do this, so plants have time to develop good roots before winter weather.

### **Few Suggested Ornamental Grasses**

*Andropogon* – Bluestem – Prominent native, warm-season grass that provides height and good color. Not fussy about soil conditions as long as it is placed in full sun. Bluestems can be a screen or hedge and also a good choice for a natural or prairie planting.

*Calamagrostis* – Feather Reed Grass – Cool-season grass with strong upright stems with wheat-like seed heads that really stand out in the late summer garden. Full sun and nearly any soil condition is okay, just keep watered in extreme heat. Use as a screen or specimen feature in the landscape.

*Festuca* – Blue Festuca – Cool-season grass that forms low mounds with powder blue spiky foliage, perfect for edging or ground cover use. Best blue coloring in full sun, but will do fine in partial shade.

*Miscanthus* – Maiden Grass – Warm-season grass that grows in full sun to partial shade and most any soil condition. Tall stems with plume seedheads can be used as a feature planting or screen for privacy.

*Panicum* – Switch Grass – Native warm-season grass with colorful upright stems that form a dense clump for a full sun to partial shade location in the landscape. Too much shade will cause Panicum to flop over. Use as a specimen, screen, along a pond edge or in decorative containers.

*Pennisetum* – Fountain Grass – Warm-season grass that forms globe-shaped mounds with dense bottlebrush flowers. Several varieties are short enough to be used as a front border. Full sun to light shade and needs good drainage. This grass does not like wet 'feet'.

*Carex (Sedges), Hakone grass and Liriope* – These three are popular ground cover plantings because of their shorter growth habit. Sedges and Hakone grass prefer partial shade while Liriope can handle sun or shade. Liriope can spread, be careful where you plant this one if you don't want it to get into neighboring plantings.