

Ornamental grasses

Ornamental grasses are some of the hottest plants today in landscaping. They are popular for the beauty they display through the seasons. The dynamic colors and swaying movements of grasses fill the senses with excitement. Ornamental grasses have many great features:

They are easy to maintain. Once established, they rarely need watering or fertilizing. Just cut the plants back every spring—that's it!

They have almost no pest problems. Insects or diseases rarely bother ornamental grasses. Believe it or not, even deer don't like them!

They grow fast. Many grasses will grow up to their mature height, even up to 8 feet, within two growing seasons.

They look good all year. You'll enjoy a changing canvas of color from the emergence of tender grass in the spring to a display of roughened textures and brilliant colors in fall. Many of these



grasses have fascinating seed heads, too. As a bonus, ornamental grasses look attractive in winter landscapes and will attract lively birds to your snowy garden.

The great variety of grasses provides us with many ways to use them in landscapes. Low-growing grasses, such as autumn moor grass and the blue fescues are handsome border plants. Tall grasses, such as silverfeather miscanthus, switchgrass, and big bluestem form specimen plantings or screens.

Among the most popular grass varieties is 'Karl Foerster' feather reed grass (shown). It grows 5 feet tall and has magnificent wheat-like flowerheads in summer.

'Silberfeder' miscanthus is a pampas grass with large silver plumes (marginally hardy in Zone 3). Another popular tall grass is 'Heavy Metal' switchgrass, which is noted for its airy pink flowers displayed over bright blue foliage.

Other recommended grasses for our state include blue grama,


blue lymegrass, Indian grass, little bluestem, ribbongrass, sideoats grama, purple moorgrass, tufted hairgrass, and variegated bulbous oatgrass.

To establish a planting, select a site that receives at least six hours of sunlight per day.

To prepare the soil bed, start by mixing two inches of organic matter into the top eight inches of the land. Good sources of organic matter include compost or aged manure. Enrich the soil with an application of a complete fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 at a rate of one to two pounds per 100 square feet.

Plantings can be started from seed, bare-root plants, or containerized plants.

Cut back dead foliage of ornamental grasses in early spring before new growth has begun. Burning off the dead foliage is not recommended in home gardens since this can be dangerous—and possibly illegal.

Divide grass plants every three or four years to rejuvenate established plants and produce new plants. Division should be done in the spring just before growth begins, or in the late summer to early fall. 

Sources: Universities of Wisconsin and Minnesota, and Northern Gardener Magazine. The following photo was made available under Creative Commons licenses specified by the photographer, allowing for adaptation, modification or building upon: "Karl Foerster Grass" by daryl_mitchell, http://www.flickr.com/photos/daryl_mitchell/3973205399/.

NDSU
Extension Service

Written by Tom Kalb,
Extension Horticulturist, NDSU
tom.kalb@ndsu.edu

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