

# Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses provide wonderful texture, movement and sound in the garden. They begin to “plume” in late summer/fall for the most part with colder nights, then begin to change to vivid yellows, oranges, reds and purples. Grasses look sharp all summer and most are very low maintenance and drought tolerant. You will see everything from small tidy one foot tall mounds for borders and pots to eight foot giants, if you have the room for large specimens. Utilize them in your landscape – they are useful additions to almost every location in the garden. Note some are “evergreen” and will provide color and foliage year around. Others are “deciduous” and after changing color in the fall remain dormant over the winter months - they will burst back to life in the spring. Many deciduous varieties are attractive all winter as well, keeping their structure and adding motion and sound to the garden.

Prune back evergreen grasses to about 4” to 6” coming out of winter if they need rejuvenation – do not haircut the tips! You can cut all deciduous types back to 2” to 4” either in the fall, after hard frost, or coming out of winter in early March BEFORE new growth starts for the season. They are easy to divide/transplant during dormant season as well. A good sharp shovel (Try a Rootslayer they are the best!) easily cleaves an old clump into parts, allowing you to move them into new locations or share them with gardening friends. Fertilizing with any all-purpose or rose/perennial food is plenty – try once coming out of winter and again in early summer, if needed. Water them while they get established and occasionally over summers to keep vigorous and to maximize fall “plumes”. Anytime is a great time to add grasses to a landscape, as they will be that much more established and showy for the garden in 2023.

There are a number of excellent grasses for our northwest gardens. As with most plants, it is hard to choose the best ones – they are so many “best” ones! First, know your location – do you need full sun, part sun, or shade? Next, do you want evergreen or deciduous? How much height are you looking for? Plant some varieties in masses for a simple yet striking presentation. Others shine as fabulous, stand-alone specimens. Utilize them in your containers, especially the evergreen ones over winter – they add great texture and color to pots. Enjoy the grass show, take some notes on some of your favorites, and let’s get planting!

## **Here are some of my favorite grasses...**

- **Acorus** – Sweet Flag – Evergreen, takes some wet, bold gold or variegated foliage options, nice short habit and great for naturalizing.
- **Anementhale** – New Zealand Wind Grass or Pheasant Grass – Semi-Evergreen, takes sun or part shade, grows to 3’, drought tolerant and very durable, great in

masses, turns copper/gold/yellow in fall through winter. Cut back for fresh look in spring if needed.

- **Andropogon** – Big Bluestem Grass – Deciduous, excellent color in summer and fall, big grower for use as specimen for both height and color.
- **Bouteloua** – Blonde Ambition Grama Grass – Deciduous, really unusual little “flag” blooms, drought tolerant and short, even as lawn substitute in sunny areas.
- **Calamagrostis** – Feather Reed Grass – Deciduous, manageable height in the 2-3 foot range, showy plumes in late summer/fall, some variegated ones like “Lightning Strike” and “Overdam” have nice variegated blade color, “Karl Forester” most common all green one.
- **Carex** – Sedges – Evergreen clumpers make nice border plants in sun and shade (depending on the variety), also beautiful additions to containers as well. All kinds of cool colors to choose from – Orange Sedge (*Carex testacea*), “Everlime”, “Everest”, “Eversheen”, “Feather Falls”, and “Everglow”. Deciduous ones as well such as “Bowl’s Golden” grow a little taller.
- **Chasmanthum** – Northern Sea Oats – Deciduous grass for part sun/part shade that has lime color and oat like seed heads in fall. They can take some wet as well and is easy to grow.
- **Cortaderia** – Pampas Grass – Evergreen gigantic clumps with the huge old feather duster plumes in the summer/fall. Give them some room to grow!
- **Deschampsia** – Tufted Hair Grass – Deciduous clumping grass with colorful blades and short plumes. Most common one in “Northern Lights”. Very hardy and easy, grows short and looks great in masses.
- **Festuca** – Fescue Grass – Evergreen short clumper with steel blue color and superior drought tolerance. Best in full sun/well drained soil.
- **Hakonechloa** – Japanese Forest Grass – Deciduous grasses with great color in spring and summer, then turning bright red in autumn. Great for shade/part shade and will spread and naturalize. “All Gold” is bright yellow, “Aureola” is variegated yellow/green, and “Beni Kaze” is bright green.
- **Helictotrichon** – Blue Oat Grass – Deciduous with steely blue color and oat seeds in fall. Best in sun, very cold hardy and drought tolerant, grows into about 1-2 feet tall and wide clumps.
- **Imperata** – Japanese Blood Grass – Deciduous spreading grass with red tip color throughout the summer and fall. Will take some wet, but be careful it does spread quickly in moist soils.

- **Liriope** – Lily Turf – Evergreen clumping grass like perennial, flower spikes in white, blue or purple come each year as well. Part sun/part shade best. Showy planted in masses or along walkways/borders. Also variegated ones like “Silvery Sunproof” or “Silver Dragon” add foliage interest as well.
- **Miscanthus** – Silver and Maiden Grasses – Deciduous and a bazillion choices for color, height, and plume on these. To name a few try consider “My Fair Maiden”, “Little Miss”, “Little Zebra”, “Gracillimus”, “Morning Light”, “Fire Dragon” and many others! Great options for all heights – some of taller ones make outstanding specimens!
- **Molina** – Moor Grass – Deciduous and showy little variegated clumping grass with nice color and plumes in fall. Great along borders or in masses. Low maintenance easy growing for sure.
- **Nasella (Stipa)** – Mexican Feather Grass – Evergreen little blonde cutie. Very short and soft, but be careful this one goes to seed a bit and will naturalize for sure.
- **Ophiopogon** – Mondo Grass – Evergreen options in Black, Green and variegated (“Edge of Night”). Awesome short little grass that spreads into groundcover and blooms as well. Use in more shady locations and avoid hot afternoon sun.
- **Panicum** – Switch Grass – Deciduous choices are colorful in both foliage and plumage right now! Lots of options again like “Hot Rod” and “Heavy Metal”. Most grow in the 3 foot tall realm and color early when blooming. Great for hot locations and drought tolerant.
- **Pennisetum** – Fountain Grass – Deciduous options that all look great in plume in later summer and fall, best in sun, drought tolerant, and short clumping habit. Look at “Red Head”, “Red Buttons”, “Burgundy Bunny”, “Little Bunny”, “Lumen Gold” and “Ginger Love”.
- **Schizachyrium** – Little Blue Stem – Deciduous grass with really showy fall colors and plumage in more of the blue/purple/red tones. Best one is “Standing Ovation” – in fact I think one of best grasses period.

**There are a number of varieties to choose from in all of these grass suggestions – explore options for growth habit/height, foliage (many have variegation), fall color, and plume. There will certainly be some that are perfect for your landscape that will bring you many seasons of joy!**