



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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All About Ornamental Grasses

The term “ornamental grass” applies not only to the true grasses, but to closely related grass-like plants as well. Together, these plants compose one of the largest groups of plants on the planet. And while most everyone knows what lawn is, many gardeners are just now becoming familiar with ornamental grasses. The basics of grass gardening are easy to understand. Some grasses creep or spread, others stay in tight, well-mannered clumps.

Cool-Season Grasses

Cool-season grasses are evergreen and hold their foliage year-round. Festucas (*Blue Fescue*), Sedges (*Carex*), and Hairgrass (*Dechampsia*) are considered cool-season grasses. These grasses are usually early bloomers and are often selected for their foliage color and texture.

Warm-Season Grasses

These grasses are dormant in winter and begin growing in the spring, flowering in summer or fall. With the shortening days and cooler temperatures of autumn, many warm-season grasses put on a fabulous display of fall color. Some of these grasses noted for their spectacular fall color are **Maiden Grass** (*Miscanthus sinensis*) and **Switch Grass** (*Panicum virgatum*).

Native Grasses

Native grasses mingle perfectly with wildflowers and play an important role in any native planting. In the prairie garden, the addition of grasses helps keep all of the plants upright. In a larger landscape, grasses can be the foundation of a design that incorporates a succession of flowering perennials. The most popular grasses have striking fall color, or seed heads with unique visual interest.

Once you know whether a grass is evergreen or deciduous (cool-season vs. warm-season), clumping or spreading, make sure you are choosing a grass that thrives in your climate and soil. **Mexican Feather Grass** (*Stipa tenuissima*), for instance, thrives in hot deserts and heavy clay soils, which would not support other grasses. A common mistake made by gardeners unfamiliar with grasses is to underestimate their potential size. A four-inch pot of Maiden Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Variegatus’) could grow four feet high and as wide in one season! To avoid crowding, give large varieties plenty of room, or choose compact forms for small gardens.

Use ornamental grasses the way you would use any other perennial, singularly for accent, or in groups for massing. In the shade, for flowering accent: **Northern Sea Oats** (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), Korean Feather Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis brachytricha*), or any of the Hair Grass (*Deschampsia*). For a tall, bold-flowering accent: Maiden Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Gracillimus’). In a perennial border: any of the Fountain Grasses (Pennisetum) or the always dependable **Feather Reed Grass** (*Calamagrostis acutiflora stricta*). For foliage accent: **Blue Fescue** (*Festuca* ‘Elijah Blue’) or the copper colored *Carex comans* ‘Bronze.’ With so many grasses to choose from, why not put an ornamental grass in your garden this season?

Planting, Pruning, Dividing Grasses

Plant grasses in early spring as soon as you can work the soil. Mulch right after planting. Water at least once a week to establish the new plants. Fertilize rarely or never; most grasses grow well in ordinary garden soil, and feeding will only leave them over lush and limp.

Remove old stalks and foliage in late winter or early spring to make room for new growth. Use hedge

shears or loppers.

Large clumps of grasses in open areas can be left alone for decades. There is no need to divide established grasses except when they are old, overgrown, or crowded, or when you want to keep them within the bounds of your design. (Grasses may also benefit from being divided and moved when a nearby shrub or tree begins to cast too much shade.) After lifting and dividing a clump—in early spring for most varieties—with a spade, ax, or saw, replant the healthiest pieces, and discard the dead center. Be sure to place aggressive spreaders where you won't need to worry about dividing them.



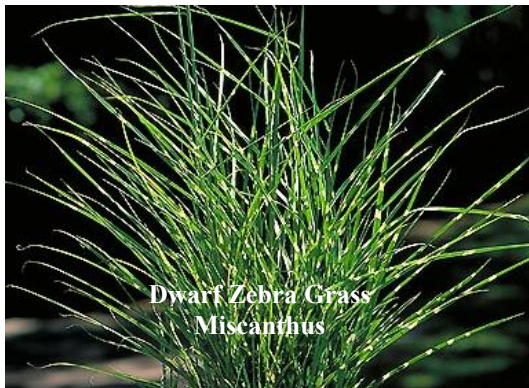
Variegated Silver Grass
Miscanthus

Gracefully arching grass topped with silvery-white plumes. Dark green blades are highlighted with a creamy white stripe. Include for textural contrast in perennial or shrub beds. Herbaceous. Full to partial sun. Moderate, clumping grower to 6 feet tall, clumps 3 to 5 feet wide.

Quite attractive, the green blades have added highlights of creamy-white margins and mid-veins creating a shimmering silvery appearance. Adds visual excitement to shrub borders. Delicate reddish-bronze plumes in late summer. Herbaceous. Full sun for best foliage coloration. Accepts dry conditions. Clumps to 5 feet tall, to 2 feet wide. Flower stalks are taller.



Morning Light Maiden Grass
Miscanthus



Dwarf Zebra Grass
Miscanthus

The arching green blades are horizontally striped with a rich bright golden band. Attractive pinkish-copper flower plumes add to the show in late summer, stalks taller than the foliage. Good for screen or hedge use.

Purple-tinged green blades in summer with a pink midrib turns brilliant red-orange in fall, attractive coloring lasting through the winter. Mauve-colored feathery plumes reach to 2 feet above the foliage. A focal point for the border and fine for containers. Herbaceous. Full sun. Compact, upright clumps to 3 to 4 feet tall and wide.



Purple Silver Grass
Miscanthus

Versatile, compact version of regular Maiden Grass. Showy clumps are topped silvery white blooms. Free flowering at an early age. Golden bronze autumn foliage. Great as specimen or in groupings. Herbaceous. Full to partial sun Fast-growing clumps are 3 to 4 feet tall, 3 feet wide.

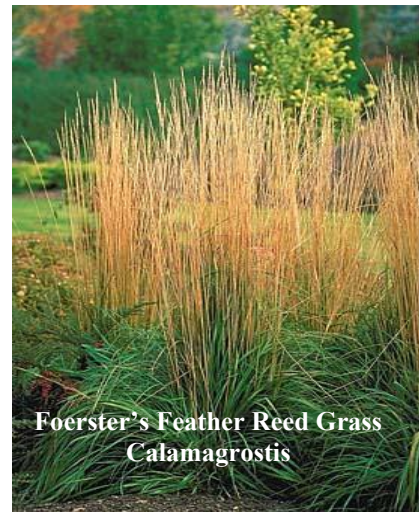


Dwarf Maiden Grass
Miscanthus



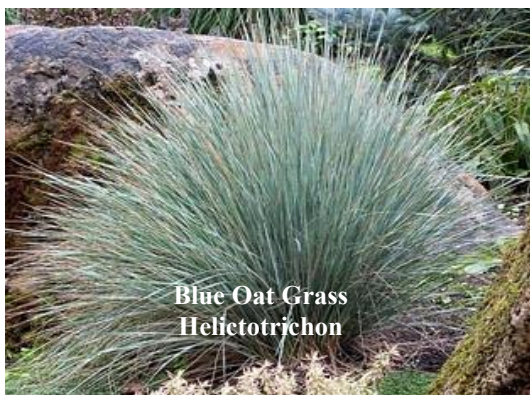
Overdam Feather Reed Grass
Calamagrostis

Create stunning vertical effects with feathery flower spikes that emerge reddish-brown in spring, turn golden in fall. Valued for its yellow-margined foliage, matures to pink-blushed white margins. Full sun. Fast-growing, arching foliage to 18 to 24 inches tall, flower stalks to 6 feet.



Foerster's Feather Reed Grass
Calamagrostis

Blooms 2 to 3 weeks earlier than common feather reed grass. Use stalks as cut flowers. Sterile seeds. Full sun. Fast growing, arching foliage to 18 to 24 inches tall, 2-foot-wide clumps; flower stalks to 6 feet.



Blue Oat Grass
Helictotrichon

Graceful fountains of colorful bright blue-gray blades form neat ornamental clumps that combine well with other grasses. Reliable and attractive accent, specimen, perfect for rock gardens. Full sun. Moderate grower to 2 to 3 feet tall and wide.

Most reliable variety for blood red foliage color. A powerful grass with brightly colored blades with the top half colored in burgundy. Coloring grows more intense in autumn. Does not bloom often and spreads slowly by rhizomes. Used to add both color and textural accent to beds and borders. Plant in masses for bolder display. Beautiful when grown around water gardens and dry stream beds. Herbaceous. Full sun to part shade in very hot climates. Moderate growth 1 to 2 feet tall and 12 inches wide.



Blood Grass
Imperata



Korean Feather Reed Grass
Calamagrostis

This grass is shade tolerant, a rare trait for a large flowering grass. This species occurs naturally in moist, deciduous woodlands and therefore is adapted to grow and bloom in partial shade. It also grows very well in full sun where the habit will be tighter and the flowering will be more profuse.

A native ornamental grass with a completely new look. The horizontal eyelash-like chartreuse flowers appear in mid-summer and age to blonde seed heads by fall. They are held on the plant right through the winter to provide many months of interest.



Blonde Ambition Blue Grama Grass
Sporobolus



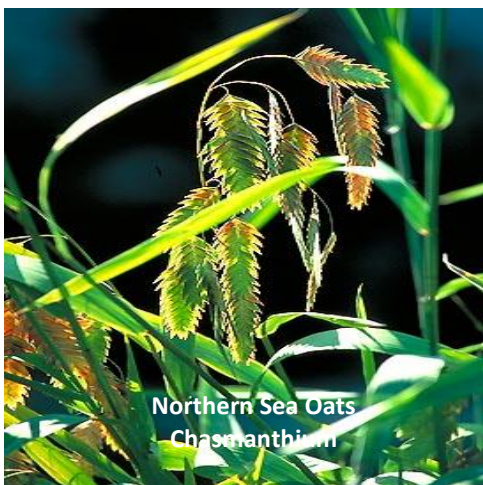
Bronze Sedge
Carex

Carex is a huge genus of more than 1,500 species of perennials with triangular, grass-like stems. Flowerheads develop on panicles of short spikes. Suited to many sites, Sedge will tolerate wet and/or shade well. Excellent in foreground or as an edger. Spreads slowly. Grass-like, colorful foliage is often brightly hued or variegated.

Deschampsia is beautiful planted in mass. The blooms produce a delicate airy mass of subtle colors. The common name Tufted Hair Grass perfectly describes the hair-like blades which grow in neatly rounded mounds.



Northern Lights Tufted Hairgrass
Deschampsia



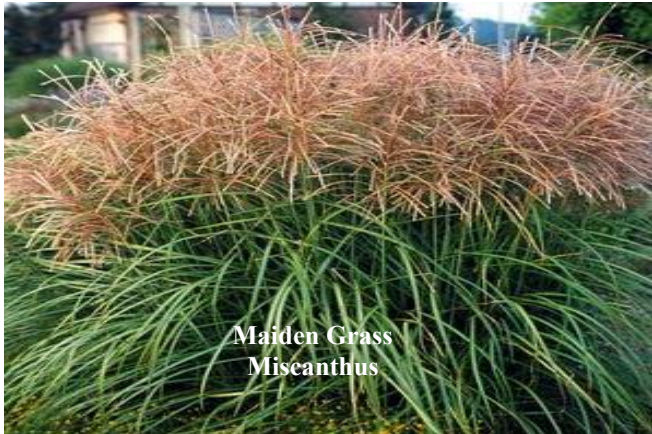
Northern Sea Oats
Chasmanthium

Attractive, bamboo-like foliage and showy, dangling, flat oat-like flower spikes make an effective accent around water features. Foliage turns coppery in fall, brown in winter. Tolerates ocean salt spray. Perennial. Partial sun. Clumping grass with sturdy stems to 2 to 3 feet tall, 2 feet wide,

Attractive grass highlighted by fluffy, buff-colored plumes arching above foliage, Terrific contrast when used among shrub or backdrop for perennial bed. Dark green tufted blades turn golden russet in fall, Herbaceous. Full sun. Moderate grower mounding to 2 to 3 feet tall, 1 to 2 feet wide.



Hameln Dwarf Fountain Grass
Pennisetum



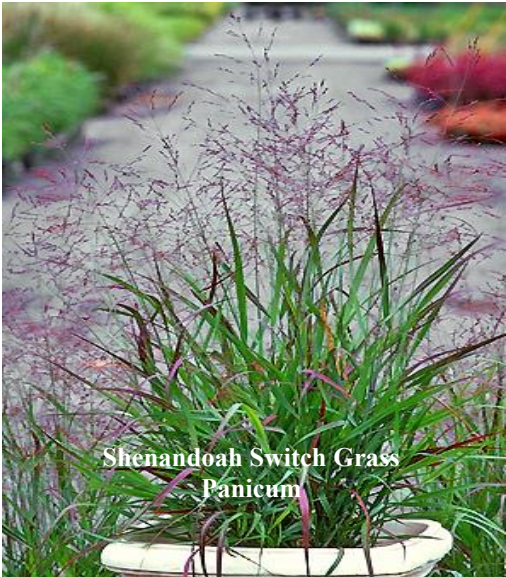
Maiden Grass
Miscanthus

Medium green foliage with natural silver lines, Huron Sunrise grows 5 to 6 feet tall and wide. Plumes open burgundy for a late summer bloom.



Heavy Metal Switch Grass
Panicum

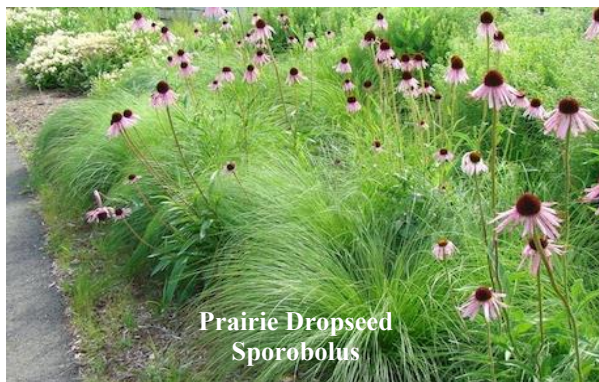
Stiffly erect blades are metallic blue gray during the season, becoming yellow in autumn. Loose, broad, weeping plumes of purple bloom stalks rise above the foliage. Quite handsome when used in groups. Herbaceous. Full sun. Clumps to 36 inches tall, 30 inches wide.



Shenandoah Switch Grass
Panicum

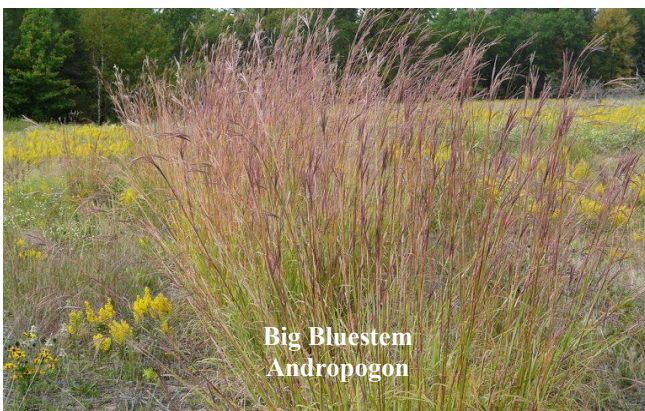
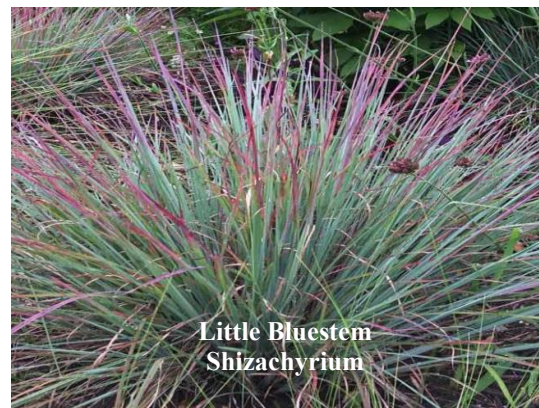
Spectacular fall color distinguishes this native switch grass. An upstanding grass with softer foliage in true green. By July dark red tones appear on the leaves. Then the whole plant turns a powerful burgundy in late fall. Flowers in late summer with plumes of airy panicles with a rose tint. Superior single specimen or mass for a drift of color. Equally at home in native and wild gardens or in containers. Herbaceous. Full sun. Fast growth to about 4 feet tall in bloom, and 2 to 3 feet wide.

Outstanding icy-blue coloration to the blades of this clumping ornamental grass; maintained throughout the heat of summer. Buff colored flowers rise above foliage in summer on mature plants creating eye-catching contrast. Perfectly suited for edging borders or mass planting as a ground cover. Evergreen. Full sun. Fast-growing, dense mounds 8 to 12 inches high and wide.



A preferred native grass for prairie gardens, Prairie Dropseed's magnificent fountain of fine textured leaves adds a touch of elegance to any planting. A burst of flowering panicles on slender stems float above the tufted grass in late summer in tints of pink and brown. The bloom has a unique fragrance with hints of coriander. In fall the foliage color turns to hues of gold. Considered by many to be the most handsome of the prairie grasses, Prairie Dropseed makes a well-defined and distinctive border when planted 18 to 24 inches apart.

Worthy of applause, the tight upright habit of spiky bluish-green stems delivers an encore performance in autumn when its foliage transitions to a brilliant fiery display of orange, red and yellow hues.



Big Bluestem is a warm season grass; it actively grows during the summer when soil temperatures are warm. It is a big plant, getting over six feet tall in most situations. In a landscape it can be used as an accent, but it can be aggressive so is not recommended for small spaces. It has great fall color in the range of gold and pink. So well-known as a 'must have' in any tallgrass prairie and a native range of most of North America, 'Big Blue' really has no other common names in use.