

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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A few years ago, I began to introduce ornamental grasses into my own garden. I do not know exactly what prompted me. I think that both its amazing color and its fountain-like shape inspired my first purchase of a Blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*). It was so very different from the rest of my plants and fit in so beautifully. It took just one purchase and I was hooked on grasses.

Since then, I have discovered that gardening with ornamental grasses has expanded radically over the past hundred years. At the turn of the nineteenth century, there were perhaps twenty-five varieties available to the home gardener; today we have hundreds from which to choose. Botanists' and plant breeders' interest has fueled this increase in varieties and nurseries have responded by making grasses readily available. In addition, gardeners today are redefining their gardens to be places where tranquility, conservation and low maintenance combine to create harmony and a link to the environment. What I most appreciate about the ornamental grasses in my garden is how they draw all the other plants together. In addition, because they are always moving, they create a partnership with the air.

Ornamental grasses are not all from the same family. They include true grasses and the related families of grass-like plants, such as sedges and rushes. They fall into two distinct growth patterns: running grasses and clumping grasses. Running grasses spread rapidly by underground rhizomes or stolons and new plants shoot up around the original plant. Clumping grasses, on the other hand, stay in one place. Home gardeners have had some unpleasant surprises with *Phalaris arundinacea picta* commonly known as ribbon-grass or Gardener's garters when after a season it has run rampant through their garden and is almost impossible to control. Though wonderful for areas that require erosion control or grown in pots, beware of the aggressive varieties in your perennial bed! Check the growth habits of grasses before you purchase an unfamiliar variety.

Ornamental grasses thrive in a wide range of climate conditions. In fact, most ornamental grasses evolved in temperate, Mediterranean climates, like the ones we enjoy in Skagit County. Both cool season and warm season grasses do well here. Warm season grasses thrive in temperatures of up to 95 degrees F. and grow steadily from late spring through the summer and fall. They often take on beautiful color in the fall when temperatures cool and then become dormant during the winter. The *Miscanthus* species; pampas grasses, giant reed grasses, fountain grasses and the *Pennisetum* species are all examples of warm weather grasses. Cool weather grasses are a delight for the winter gardener because they are growing when the temperature is near freezing. Frequently they have two growth times during the year and are dormant in the summer. Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis acutiflora*) 'Karl Foerster' is a nice selection because it stays green and fresh throughout the summer. There are dozens from which to choose.

The care of grasses is one of the easiest garden chores. Plant them in the areas of the garden for which they are most suited: shade or sun, dry or moist soil conditions. Most gardeners agree that ornamental grasses do not need fertilizing. Once a year, in the early spring, they require a haircut. Just take your pruners or some sturdy scissors and cut them off to about six inches. I always think they look like badgers when I trim them back; but they are revitalized by this procedure and new growth appears in a few weeks.

After a few years, you will notice that your clumping grasses need dividing because the centers are dying off. Then it is time to dig them up, select the best clumps from the original plant and replant that part. They will be revived and start to grow again almost immediately.

Any garden can benefit from the addition of ornamental grasses. They produce a wide variety of inflorescences (flowers) that enhance the garden, in addition to color and movement. Select tall varieties as a backdrop and tiny varieties for borders. They thrive in pots or in open fields, if given a little care, and there are varieties to suit every taste and need.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.