



ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Landscaping with ornamental grasses has become popular in home gardens, city parks, and commercial landscapes. And for good reason! Grasses have a lot going for them. There is an ornamental grass to fit almost every garden spot whether sunny, shady, dry, wet, cool, or hot. In addition, the diversity of size, color, and texture means you can find a spot for an ornamental grass in almost any garden design. And this group of plants can be enjoyed year-round. They are outstanding in the winter as they add movement and a sculptural element to the garden.

Great places to see several mature grass species and view how they can be incorporated into area gardens requires a visit to Ferris Perennial Garden in Manito Park on Spokane's South Hill, or the Green Zone at the Spokane County Extension office just south of the Fairgrounds on Havana Street. These great demonstration garden features several ornamental grasses (one variety over eight feet tall) that thrive in Inland Northwest landscapes. Most varieties are labeled with both the common name and botanical name making it easy to duplicate the grass you like in your own garden.

“Ornamental grass” is a descriptive term describing a grass-like plant, typically with narrow leaves, which is used for ornamental purposes as opposed to turf, forage, or a cover crop. The category includes plants from several different families. True grasses in this category belong to the Poaceae family, which consists of more than 300 genera. Sedges (Cyperaceae) are also included in the category and those with angular stems are considered true sedges and belong to the genus Carex. Rushes and cattails are described and sold as ornamental grasses, and the category can also include restios, grass-like plants native to South Africa.

Grasses can be categorized in many ways, but are often grouped into cool and warm seasons and evergreens. Knowing whether the grass is a cool or a warm season grass or an evergreen will give you information on the seasonal growth pattern and necessary maintenance needed for that grass.

Cool season grasses will start to grow in late winter or early spring just like our cool season turf grasses which grow early in the year and slow in the heat of the summer. Cool season ornamental grasses also seem to do better and have better foliage quality when the temperatures are cool or if they are given sufficient water during drought periods.

Prune cool season grasses to ground level in late winter or early spring before they start growing. These grasses may require more frequent division to keep them healthy looking and vigorous. If not, they tend to die out in the center. Some of the more popular cool season grasses for the Inland Northwest include: Blue Fescue (*Festuca ovina glauca*); Hakone Grass (*Hakonechloa*

macra ‘Aureola’); Tufted Hair Grass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*); and Feather Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis acutiflora*).

Warm season grasses will do better during warmer times of the year and remain good looking even when temperatures are high and moisture is limited. Warm season grasses do not begin to show growth until the weather becomes stable and the soils warm.

The foliage of these grasses usually browns out in the fall, which requires cutting back the plants to about 4-6 inches tall. This is done in late spring or early summer of the following year. Some warm season grasses for the Inland Northwest include: Japanese Blood Grass (*Imperata cylindrica*); Zebra Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Zebrinus’); and Blue Wild Rye (*Elymus arenarius*).

Evergreens and semi-evergreens can be cut back in late winter or early spring but often all that is needed is to remove any brown leaves with your gloved hands or comb with a small hand-held rake.

Clumping or running

Grasses can also be grouped into clumping or running grasses. Clumping types form thick mounds that increase in girth. Running grasses spread by vigorous rhizome and can be invasive. Most varieties of bamboo, for example, spread by rhizome and can cause havoc if not contained.

Designing with grasses

Grasses add a new dimension to the garden with an informal, natural appearance. They usually look their best when grouped with other plants. However, they can be massed together to form screens, hedges, or edges. A single clump of grass can act as a specimen to flank an entrance or as a punctuation mark in the middle of an existing bed. Grasses extend the perennial bed by filling in between flowering plants. Some provide beautiful graceful seed heads that move in a gentle breeze. Others do not flower at all, and yet provide interesting foliage color or texture.

Most varieties of grasses are drought tolerant once established except in cases of extreme drought or very sandy soil. Grasses come in all sorts of sizes, shapes, and textures so it’s easy to design a beautiful drought tolerant/Xeriscape landscape using only grasses or in combination with other drought tolerant plants.

Planting and care

Grasses do best when planted in the spring so they have a chance to develop over the summer. Most grasses prefer full sun but there are varieties that do well in part shade and a few that can be successfully grown in full shade. Grasses often do better in poor soil with low organic matter and low nutrient levels, but since there are so many plants in this category there are a few exceptions.

Another reason to love grasses in your garden is the fact they are relatively pest free, and while very few plants are ignored by deer if they are hungry enough, grasses are usually classified as “deer resistant”.