

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Make the most of these versatile plants.

While the word “grass” likely conjures up images of sod or a lawn mower, there’s another category of grasses that have gained some long-deserved attention in the garden. Ornamental grasses come in every shape, size and form imaginable, from 6-ft.-tall feathery heads to 12-in. clumps, to purple blades, striped leaves and long cattails. And the bonus: most ornamental grasses are low maintenance.

The versatility of ornamental grasses allows them to fill a variety of roles in the landscape, including erosion control, specimen plants, borders, components in containers, backdrops, winter interest, and so on. In fact, the label, ornamental grass, actually includes more than just true grasses; sedges, rushes and even bamboos also get grouped in this category.

But before you walk down the garden center aisle plopping pots in your cart, it’s important to learn how to choose the right cultivars. Here are a few questions to ask yourself. The answers will make it easy for you to pick grasses that match those needs.

- 1** Are you planting a decorative border or looking for a screen?
- 2** Do you need a small, medium or tall grass for the location you’re thinking of?
- 3** Sun or shade?
- 4** Do you want a single accent plant or a mass planting? If it’s a mass planting, do you want a layered look with different varieties or do you want to use just a single specimen?
- 5** Do you want the grass to survive the winter? If so, what temperatures will it have to endure? (However, if you find something you like that isn’t winter hardy, there’s no rule



against using a USDA Hardiness Zone 6 grass as an annual if you live in Zone 4. Plenty of people treat ornamental grasses as annuals.)

The above questions should help you identify some must-have characteristics for your ornamental grass picks. Beyond that, let’s take a look at the different types of grasses you can choose from.

Clumping grasses. Look for this type of ornamental grass if you don’t want a plant to invade and take over your garden. This type grows in a neat mound or clump and will slowly grow in size over time.

Rhizome grasses. Rhizome simply means that this type of grass will spread via underground roots or rhizomes. They can invade a perennial bed quickly, so be sure to use them in places where you want this type of growth or plant them in areas that are well contained—such as a bed bordered by asphalt that will stop its migration. (You can also plant these invasive types in bottom-



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less pots, in the ground; the pot will keep it from spreading.) Blue lyme grass, cordgrass and ribbongrass all fall into this category—great ornamental grasses in their own right, but a handful if you put them in the wrong spot.

Cool-season grasses. Since growth in grasses is based on temperature, it's also easy to group them based on the weather they grow best in. Cool-season grasses start growing early in the spring and usually flower earlier. They'll also perform well in the fall months. Don't be alarmed if some of these grasses stop growing in the summer or even go dormant and turn brown; they do most of the growing when temps are between 33F and 75F. When planning your garden, use this type of grass to draw attention in the spring, and utilize either warm-season grasses or other perennials or annuals nearby for color and interest in the summer months. Cool-season grasses generally need to be divided more often than warm-season ones. Examples of cool-season grasses include blue fescue (*Festuca* species), feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis* species), blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon*), tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia*), autumn moor grass (*Sesleria*).

Warm-season grasses. These grasses prefer warmer temps of 75F to 85F and will usually flower later in the summer or even in the early fall. For these, try an opposite plan, compared to cool-season grasses: Rely on spring-blooming bulbs, such as tulips, for early in the season. Then, in the summer, the grasses can cover up the spent bulbs and take the show. Examples of warm-season grasses include *Miscanthus* species, fountain grass (*Penisetum* species), prairie cord grass (*Spartina*), northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium*), switch grass (*Panicum*), and pampas grass (*Erianthus*).

Etc. There are a dozen other ways to categorize grasses—from color, to size, to special growing conditions (moist, dry, poor soil, sun or shade) and the look of the foliage, the flowers or the texture. Here, again, you'll want to refer to those first five questions we asked in the beginning to help you match plant with form and function.

At Home, in the Garden

Planting. Plant ornamental grasses in the spring or the fall. If planting in the fall, try to do it earlier on so that roots have a chance to get established. For this fall planting, you might also want to put down a light cover of straw or hay for mulch after the first few frosts; it'll help them survive that first winter.

Plant ornamental grasses in beds that have been prepared. Ideally, incorporate composted, organic matter into the soil. You can add a low amount of fertilizer as well, but grasses don't like high levels of fertilizer. Don't plant the grasses any deeper than the soil line in the container. Water in after planting.



Care. Besides their often graceful presence, one of the best attributes of ornamental grasses is their low-maintenance requirements. You may need to occasionally water plants, but that will depend on the species you have.

With perennial grasses, your main responsibility will be cutting back the foliage. However, if you really want to get the most out of your grass, don't do this in the fall! One of the great things about these plants is the visual interest they can add to a landscape in the winter months—from golden foliage to snow-laced stalks. Instead, in the spring, before the new growth has started to emerge, cut back the dead foliage to a height of 4 to 6 in.

Some perennial grasses may need to be divided from time to time, particularly the cool-season types. If you start seeing die-out in the center of a plant, that's a sign that it needs a division. Do this in the early spring, before the new growth occurs, or in the fall, after the growing season is done. 🌿

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