

Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses provide wonderful texture, movement and sound in the garden. They are beginning to “plume” right now and due to the colder nights this time of year, 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 mounders 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 that some are “evergreen” and will provide color and foliage year around, while 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 too, with frost, motion and sound.

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 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 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 growing and to maximize fall “plumes”. It is a great time to add grasses to a landscape, as they will grow some roots over the fall and winter and be that much more established and showy for the garden in 2024.

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, nice short habit and great for naturalizing.
- **Andropogon** (Big Bluestem Grass) – Deciduous, excellent color in summer and fall, big grower use as specimen for height and color.
- **Bouteloua** (Blonde 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 to 3 foot range, showy plumes in late summer/fall, some variegated ones like ‘Lightning Strike’ and ‘Overdam’ have nice blade color, ‘Karl Forester’ most common green one.
- **Carex** (Sedges) – Evergreen clumpers that make nice border plants in sun and shade (depending on the variety), also make beautiful additions to containers. 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 ‘Bowler’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 this time of year. They can take some wet as well.
- **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.
- **Festuca** (Fescue Grass) – Evergreen short clumping variety 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 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. ‘Lemon Zest’ – new for 2023!
- **Helictotrichon** (Blue Oat Grass) – Deciduous with steely blue color and oat seeds in fall. Best in sun, drought tolerant and grows into about 1 to 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.
- **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’.
- **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 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 ground cover 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 in heat and drought tolerant.
- **Pennisetum** (Fountain Grass) – Deciduous options that all look great in plume right now. Great 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’.

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!

Fall Perennials

As for fall blooming perennials, there are plenty of options that will bloom into fall. Many summer bloomers like Coneflowers (*Echinacea*) and Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) continue summer into fall. Salvias, Agastache, and many others typically bloom until frost as well. Sedums of all kinds are blooming now and most going well through September/October. But here are a few perennials that really shine in the fall...

- **Anemones** – Fall blooming machines for the shade/part shade/woodland garden. Now can be found in taller and shorter versions, but all will tend to spread or naturalize. Mainly white and pink flowers in single or double flowers.
- **Asters** – The classic fall flower in all kinds of colors, mainly the blues/lavenders/purples catch the gardener's fancy! Easy to grow with good drainage and great for late summer/fall bees.
- **Autumn Fern** – Beautiful evergreen-type fern with nice orangey-red new growth, especially glowing in fall season coming into winter. Great addition to any woodland garden location.
- **Bergenia** – Striking large foliage with red to burgundy color in fall/winter and nice pink spring bloom. Easy to grow and evergreen for partial shade to shade garden locations.
- **Mukdenia/Mukgenia** – These glow with fall color! Foliage is shaped like a maple, and they grow as clumping ground cover in shade gardens. This time of year the foliage turns to extreme crimson and will knock your socks off!
- **Mums** – The Belgian-type mums are everywhere in the fall, and will typically overwinter as long as drainage is good. Any color in the rainbow can be found in the world of fall mums in single or double flowers.
- **Pink Elf Saxifrage** – These outstanding clumping perennials for deep shade have sweet foliage through spring and summer, then explode with bright pink color in October. A great introduction from Dan Hinkley through Monrovia.
- **Plumbago (*Ceratostigma*)** – Plumbago sports the unique combination of burning red fall color with bright cobalt blue flowers in fall. A low option for sunny borders.
- **Toad Lilies (*Tricyrtis*)** – Great fall bloomers for shade/woodland gardens in a few color options. They have intricate unique flowers and will take some wet as well.