



ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

A Master Gardener Fact Sheet

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

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INTRODUCTION

It wasn't so long ago that ornamental grasses were seldom used in home gardens, but in recent years there has been an astounding growth in the popularity of these grasses because of their beauty, diversity, usefulness and durability (Darke, 2007). As a result, a huge selection of grasses is now available to gardeners throughout BC. Imagine a drift of buff-colored, feathery, needle-fine *Nasella tenuissima* (Mexican feather grass) swaying and rustling in a breeze, and you will see some of the unique qualities that grasses bring to landscapes: sound and gentle movement. A quick look at the other special features and attributes of grasses shows why they are now an essential part of any landscape. They come in all shapes, sizes, colors and textures; add interest and drama throughout the year; combine well with almost any kind of plant, and can perform a variety of functions, acting as specimen plants, fillers, background plantings, screens, groundcovers and container plants. In smaller residential gardens, the most successful way to use grasses is to integrate them in mixed plantings, along with perennials, annuals, bulbs, deciduous shrubs and dwarf conifers. In addition to being low maintenance and disease- and pest-resistant, there are grass species suited for almost all moisture and light levels.



Miscanthus sp. PHOTO: James Good

The term ornamental grass is used to include true grasses (Poaceae family), as well as grass-like plants, including sedges (Cyperaceae), rushes (Juncaceae), restios (Restionaceae) and cattails (Typhaceae). Bamboos are not covered in this Fact Sheet. There are varieties of grasses for every climate zone in North America, and some of the best grasses are very hardy and will withstand quite cold temperatures. It is important that the grasses you buy are suited to your garden's light and moisture levels, climate and hardiness zone. Also, before planting, consider the potential of a grass for uncontrolled spreading. Most perennial grasses are well behaved if appropriately selected, placed and maintained. The section on **Growing and Maintaining Grasses** discusses some ways to minimize maintenance from self-sown grasses.

COOL-SEASON GRASSES AND WARM-SEASON GRASSES



Front cover:
Miscanthus sp.
PHOTO:
James Good

Ornamental grasses can be classified as either cool-season or warm-season, based on their growth patterns in either the cool or warm seasons. Using both types of grasses in your garden will help to extend the gardening season; knowing about the growth patterns of the two groups will also help you decide which grasses to use with other garden plants, as well as how to maintain a particular grass. *Gardening with Grasses* (King and Oudolf, 1998) is an excellent resource if you are looking for ideas on combining perennials with grasses, or grasses for special places, such as seaside gardens, dry sites, damp sites or shady spots.

Cool-season grasses. Cool-season grasses, which include sedges (*Carex*), Fescues, *Helictotrichon* (Blue oat grass), *Deschampsia* (Tufted hair grass) and *Milium effusum* (Wood millet), start to grow early in the spring, reach their full size before summer, and sometimes go dormant or partially dormant when temperatures are higher, or if they do not get enough water during drought. Cool-season grasses resume growth in autumn, when there is more rain and temperatures are cooler.

These grasses love the milder winters and long, cool, damp springs of BC's south coast. Many tend to be evergreen or semi-evergreen, even in cooler Interior areas, and are some of the first grasses to flower. A few of the cool-season grasses, such as *Calamagrostis* and *Deschampsia*, keep their flower heads for many months. Cutting back these plants is not necessary; just prune off or use your hands to comb out the brown or winter-damaged foliage in the spring. They can be divided or transplanted in winter or early spring and also in late summer/autumn.

Warm-season grasses. Warm-season grasses, which like it hot, do not start growing until late spring or early summer, when the soil warms up and air temperatures are more stable. They usually flower in late summer/early fall and often keep their dead (yet striking) foliage right through winter. Unlike the cool-season grasses, warm-season grasses are much less susceptible to drought stress. Their late start, showy flower heads, textures, winter colors and upright forms help to prolong their season of interest and offer gardeners many opportunities for pairing these grasses with spring bulbs, late-flowering perennials and woody shrubs. In the late summer/early fall garden, they pair well with many perennials, including *Eupatorium*, *Sedum*, *Echinacea*, *Rudbeckia* and *Gaura*. One of the best warm-season grasses for adding structure and color to the fall and winter garden is *Molinia caerulea* 'Moorflamme' (Purple moor grass), with its rusty color and ability to hold up well against wind, rain and snow. *Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal' (Blue switch grass) is another excellent winter grass, as it stays upright, even in snow. Other warm-season grasses include *Miscanthus* and *Pennisetum*.

Wait until early spring (late February/early March) to cut back warm-season grasses to about 10 cm (4 in). Cutting back the grass before the new growth starts ensures the crown of the grass can warm up and start growing; it also ensures that the new growth will not be accidentally clipped off when you are pruning. These grasses are best divided when they are in active growth, in late spring/early summer. On the south coast, they can also be transplanted or divided in fall, but be aware that a very cold winter could kill the grass if newly-transplanted plants succumb to winter cold.

GROWING AND MAINTAINING GRASSES

Ornamental grasses are generally easy-to-grow, low maintenance plants, provided they are appropriately selected, placed, and given cultural conditions that minimize plant stress. Most of them thrive in normal, fertile and well-drained garden soils, although some types can tolerate other conditions. Plant in spring or fall, spacing plants about as far apart as their maximum height, with the top of the root ball level with the soil surface. All newly planted grasses need regular watering until they become established. It is not necessary to add any chemical fertilizer; just apply a thin layer of compost each spring, and a 5-cm (2-in) layer of mulch to retain moisture/control weeds. Some species may need dividing every 3–4 years to keep the plant vigorous. The best way to propagate perennial grasses is to divide the root ball in spring or early summer. See the section on **Cool and Warm Season Grasses** for information on cutting back grasses.

Controlling self-seeding. The potential for grasses to self-seed in a garden depends on a number of factors, including the species, garden conditions, climate and flowering time. If you do not want to remove seedlings, choose species that are sterile, such as *Pennisetum orientale*, or *Calamagrostis* × *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. Or, choose late bloomers, such as *Miscanthus* 'Purpurascens', so they will not have time to set seed. Another way to reduce self-sowing is to avoid over-watering. Adding gravel or stone mulches will also reduce the amount of self-seeding and make it easier to find and remove any unwanted seedlings. It is also good to know how a particular grass grows, so you won't be planting a future problem. Clump-forming grasses grow in neat mounds or clumps, mix well with other perennials and will not become invasive. Rhizome-forming grasses, such as ribbon grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), spread by underground stems and may become invasive and aggressive, depending on the species.

GREAT GRASSES FOR SUN

Most of the true grasses (Poaceae) thrive in sunny garden situations, and like a well-drained, reasonably fertile, loamy soil. However, there are exceptions, and some grasses can adapt to wet, heavy clays or dry, infertile sites.

To ensure flowering and adequate growth, plant sun-loving grasses where they will get at least five hours of direct sunlight during the growing season. Plants will be stronger and more upright with more sun, and smaller and lax in less. In hot, dry Interior BC sites, where the sun is more intense, some grasses may require more moisture or protection from afternoon sun.

Here are just a few of the best grasses for sunny sites. Maximum size includes bloom height.

Calamagrostis × *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' (Feather reed grass). Cool season. Zone 6. Clumping. To 2 m (6 ft); average moist soil, but tolerates heavy clays; strictly upright growth.

Carex buechananii (Leatherleaf sedge). Cool season. Zone 7. Clumping. To 30 cm (12"); average-moist soil; slender, bronze foliage; other bronze-foliaged cultivars available.

Molinia caerulea subsp. *caerulea* 'Variegatum' (Variegated moor grass). Warm season. Zone 5. Clumping. To 120 cm (4 ft). Yellow-striped foliage; prefers moist soil but drought-tolerant once established; protect from hot afternoon sun in very hot areas; does not self-seed.

M. caerulea 'Moorflamme' (Purple moor grass). Prefers moist soil; great fall color; strong architectural form; stays upright through winter.

Miscanthus sinensis 'Morning Light' (Silver grass). Warm season. Zone 4. Clumping. To 1.5 m (5 ft). Average water; drought-tolerant once established; blue-green foliage with white margins; upright form; grow 'Adagio' in smaller gardens.

Nasella tenuissima (Mexican feather grass). Cool season. Zone 6. Clumping. To 60 cm (2 ft). Well-drained soil; fine-textured foliage; attractive through winter.

Panicum virgatum 'Heavy Metal' (Blue switch grass). Warm season. Zone 4. Sod-forming. To 1.5 m (5ft). Drought tolerant; upright form.

Pennisetum alopecuroides 'Hameln' (Dwarf fountain grass). Warm season. Zone 5. Clumping. To 90 cm (3 ft); prefers moist soil but drought-tolerant when established; flowerheads resemble large foxtails; deep golden amber fall foliage; many other cultivars available.

P. orientale 'Karley Rose' (Oriental fountain grass). Warm season. Zone 5. Clumping. To 1.2 m (4 ft). Well-drained soil; fluffy, silvery-pink flower heads; does not self-seed.

P. setaceum 'Rubra' (Purple fountain grass). Grow as an annual, but worthy of a spot in the garden for its masses of purple, foxtail plumes.

GREAT GRASSES FOR WOODLAND AND SHADE

Most grass species that prefer shade do best in deciduous shade or the variable shade of a woodland garden, but very few can do well in deep shade, such as shade found in a coniferous forest. However, some of the sedges (*Carex* spp.) are well suited for shadier spots. For example, for part to full shade, consider *C. elata* 'Bowles Golden,' with striking, gold foliage; *C. oshimensis* 'Evergold' and *C. morrowii* 'Ice Dance' and 'Variegata' for variegated foliage. Here are just a few of the other grasses suitable for some degree of shade. Many can also be grown in sunny areas, but may need more moisture.

Calamagrostis brachytricha (Korean feather reed grass). Warm season. Clumping. Zone 4. To 1.2 m (4 ft). Partial shade to full sun; adapts to a wide range of soils; slightly coarse foliage; flowers last into winter.

Chasmanthium latifolium (Northern sea oats). Warm season. Zone 4. To 1.2 m (4 ft). Clumping. Partial shade; drought-tolerant; can handle poorly-drained clay; self-seeds in moist environments; nodding spikelets of flowers.

Deschampsia flexuosa 'Aurea', 'Tatra Gold' (Tufted hair grass). Cool season. Zone 5. To 60 cm (2 ft). Partial shade; adapts to wide variety of soil; fine-textured, luminous yellow-green foliage; other cultivars available.

Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola' (Golden Japanese forest grass). Warm season. Mat forming. Zone 4. To 45 cm (18 in). Partial shade to shade (in hot, dry climates); moist, organic, well-drained soil; yellow-green foliage; other varieties of *H. macra* also available.

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