

Maintaining a well-manicured lawn demands tenacity and talent. There are those individuals who thrive on the competition of having the best-looking lawn in their neighborhood. To me, such a lawn is nothing more than functional grass. Functional grass may hold some aesthetic value, but its primary purpose is practicality. Maintaining functional grass costs money, uses precious water and its maintenance consumes valuable time. This grass needs mowing. Basically, it provides a uniform surface on which to walk when we are out in the yard. I have



often joked that during the winter months, everyone's functional grass is on equal status— each looks the same, especially when covered with snow.

and sound to the landscape. One can use ornamental grass like one uses flowers, trees and shrubs.

A landscape of only functional grass, whether covered with snow or exposed to the elements, is boring. Such is not the case with ornamental grass. Ornamental grass by contrast, is not meant to be mowed. It is not meant to be uniform; nor is it meant to be walked upon. The main purpose of ornamental grass is to be attractive— thus its name, **ornamental**. Ornamental grass is an all-season grass which adds life, motion

Many times, while confined indoors and staring out my window watching the snow whipped about by subarctic winds, I reaffirmed my affection for the ornamental grasses planted in our backyard. Their wispy, golden, dry foliage and vertical presence contrasted brilliantly against the harsh, white winter landscape. Left standing and swaying in the winter winds, these tall, thin shafts and fluffy plumes exhibited a magical charm.

I am convinced no landscape should be without ornamental grasses. The following are important reasons why one should plant ornamental grasses.

- Ornamental grasses require little effort to maintain.
- Ornamental grasses come in many heights, colors, textures.
- Ornamental grasses are adaptable; many tolerate drought, low fertility, fluctuating winter temperatures and poorer soils.
- Ornamental grass seed heads and foliage add fall and winter visual interest.
- Dried grasses have many decorative uses indoors and out.

Unlike many other herbaceous plants, ornamental grasses do not need to be cut down in the fall after the first killing frost. Left standing, their foliage remains attractive while it insulates the crown of the plant from the freezing winter temperatures. The foliage is generally removed in the early spring just before new growth resumes.

Numerous ornamental grasses are available to the home gardener. I've listed four of my favorite perennial ornamental grasses.

- **Miscanthus sinensis 'Zebrinus'** is commonly known as zebra grass. This very popular garden cultivar is characterized by arching, banded variegation of golden-yellow bars. Zebrinus grows to 8' tall, with feathery plumes emerging in September to mid-October.



- **Pennisetum alopecuroides** is a dwarf fountain grass reaching a mature height of 24 to 36 inches. Its foliage is green and fine textured. Creamy tan seed heads appear in July through September. It prefers well-drained soil and does well in full to light shade. Once established, this ornamental grass is deer resistant and drought tolerant.



- **Erianthus ravennae**, often called hardy pampas grass, is truly one of the giants in the grass world. It is capable of reaching ten feet high. It provides spectacular fall and winter color. Unfortunately, it is subject to damage during severe winters.

- **Chasmanthium latifolium** commonly called northern sea oats is a loosely tufted, clump-forming grass with lance-shaped arching foliage that turns bronze in the winter. Decorative oat-like panicles of flat green flower heads shimmer and rustle in the wind. By late winter these flower heads age to a deep bronze color. Dried spikelets work well in arrangements.



Let's face it, functional grass may be practical, but it is boring. Why not spice it up this spring and plant ornamental grasses. Hundreds exist. Many are perennials well adapted for Zone 5, while others can be grown as annuals. The University of Nebraska at Lincoln has a great Neb-guide titled *Ornamental Grasses for Nebraska Landscape*. It can be downloaded by going to www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/e-public/pages/index.jsp No matter which you choose, ornamental grass provides four-season beauty — well worth having in any landscape.

