



Outstanding Ornamental Grasses

By
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Ornamental grasses are key plants for the garden providing seasonal beauty with colors and textures only they can provide. Ornamental grasses are easy to grow, well adapted to the extremes of the Great Plains climate and offer a huge array of sizes, colors and flowering times.

- Many gardeners are discovering the many benefits ornamental grasses bring to the garden while creating a more diverse and adaptable landscape for the Great Plains.
- Perhaps no other group of plants can offer such a huge array of textures, forms, sizes, colors, flowering times, and cultural adaptations than grasses. From the tiny 6-inch dwarf blue fescue to the towering giant reed grass growing to 18 feet in one season, there is seemingly a grass to fit any landscape.
- Grasses provide movement in the garden, dancing in the slightest summer breeze. As they move, the stems and leaves rustle together to add sound to the garden. The flowers and foliage of grasses are highly translucent and are often at their best when back-lit or side-lit by the sun. The low angle of the sun in autumn and winter can literally make a grass glow.
- Ornamental grasses come in a variety of soft and subtle colors, from forest green to lime and from gray-green to powder blue to light yellow, all complimenting brightly colored perennial flowers. The autumn chill transforms grasses into an array of golds, russets, bronze, and burgundies. The fluffy flowers and seed heads of grasses undergo a number of changes in color and form from month to month, often enhanced by morning fogs and frosts in the fall.
- Most grasses, no matter what size, shape, or color, add a strong vertical element to a garden design. The long linear leaves and fine stems of large grasses provide a soft, fine-textured backdrop and shorter grasses compliment broad-leaf perennials in front. Grasses help frame the flowers and provide support for floppy perennials. Ornamental grasses are easy to grow when provided a well-drained soil and sunny conditions.
- Cut grasses are ideal in fresh or dried arrangements—they offer a long vase life, vertical line, excellent filler material; seasonal beauty in both indoor and outdoor containers

Some of the best ornamental grasses for the landscape are native to the Great Plains. Gardeners are growing knee-high grasses such as sideoats grama, blue grama, junegrass, little bluestem, and prairie dropseed to create more of a short grass prairie. Taller grasses such as big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass were once key components of the tall grass prairie and thankfully are now also becoming key components in today's urban prairies. Grasses can be divided into short grasses and tall grasses, but they can also be divided by season: cool season grasses are green as soon as temperatures rise above freezing. Warm season grasses grow in the heat of summer and bloom in late summer or early fall.

Short Prairie Grasses for Sunny, Dry Sites

- **Blue Grama** (*Bouteloua gracilis*)—18", 12" w. Native to dry prairies; tufted with thin, wiry leaves to 8"; 1" eyelash-like seed heads top thin stems to 18" in late June; nice decorator plant or mass for prairie style lawn.
- **Sideoats Grama** (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)—2-3', 18" w. Mounds of gray-green foliage; numerous narrow flower stalks with oatlike seed heads held on one side of the stems, to 3' h; bronze-orange fall color; straw in winter.
- **Little Bluestem** (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)—2-3', 18" w. Dependable native bunch grass with fine-textured bright green or light blue leaves to 2' tall in summer; the late summer flowers dry in fall, becoming silvery and remain attractive through winter; avoid highly fertile soils or excessive moisture, heavy mulching.
 - **'Blaze'** —Nebraska seed source; nice reddish fall color.
 - **'Blue Heaven'** —U of Minnesota selection; upright habit; bright blue foliage.
 - **'The Blues'** —Flint Hills of Kansas seed source; needs dry, sunny site

- **Prairie Dropseed** (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)—2-3' h, 18" w. Native bunch grass with thin, ribbon-like leaves form 2' mounds; delicate seed heads appear in late summer and remain attractive through fall; attractive when back lit and scented; foliage turns deep orange to light copper; likes it dry and never needs dividing.
- **Junegrass, Prairie** (*Koeleria pyramidata*) Dryland, cool season, native bunch grass with gray-green leaves; blooms early June with narrow, erect inflorescence; needs well-drained, dry soils; short-lived but will reseed making them ideal for naturalizing. Dormant in summer.
- **Sedge, Plains Oval** (*Carex brevior*) Forms dense clumps of grass-like foliage; prairie sedges native to dryland and wetland soils; combine with warm season grasses for early spring color and weed competition; durable, adaptable plants.
- **Sedge, Prairie** (*Carex bicknellii*) Forms dense clumps of grass-like foliage; prairie sedges native to dryland and wetland soils; combine with warm season grasses for early spring color and weed competition; durable, adaptable plants.

Tall Prairie Grasses for Wet/Dry Soils

- **Big Bluestem** (*Andropogon gerardii*)—5-6' h, 2' w. Impressive native of the tall grass prairie; rich, green leaves to 2' by the end of June; flowering stalks in August up to 6' high; seed heads resemble turkey's foot; reliable fall color in copper, rich orange, with maroon tones; may grow floppy if shaded; wet or dry soils. Single plants are subtly attractive and broad drifts can be dramatic as a backdrop or screen. **'Pawnee'** –NE seed source; good reddish-orange fall color. **'Blackhawks'**—Foliage emerges green, then develops red-bronze hues towards the tips in summer.
- **Indiangrass** (*Sorghastrum nutans*)—5-6' h, 2' w One of the most beautiful prairie grasses in fall. A clump former with blue-green leaves and golden, feathery seed heads held above leaves in fall to 6' high; It is very adaptable and can grow in a variety of sites; moderately drought tolerant; Best grown in full sun; They will self-sow so this is a great one for meadow plantings. **'Bluebird'** –wide, blue foliage; nice golden plumes. **'Indian Steel'** –blue foliage; nice upright habit.
- **Switchgrass** (*Panicum virgatum*) Very adaptable to soil types; wet or dry, sandy or clay; use for quick screen, backdrop, vertical line, rain gardens, poor soils. Avoid shade and top watering to prevent lax, floppy stems.
 - **'Dallas Blues'** -blue-green wide bladed leaves; maroon tinted seed heads; 5-7' h
 - **'Northwind'** –most upright of all selections; 5-6' h, 3' w
 - **'Prairie Fire'** --distinctly red form; blue-green spring foliage turns shades of deep red by early summer and butter yellow in fall
 - **'Ruby Ribbons'**-- blue- green base foliage that turns a deep wine-red color months before other switchgrass. Fantastic new selection.
 - **'Shenandoah'** –compact plants; leaves streaked with red beginning in July; 4' h
- **Wildrye, Canada** (*Elymus Canadensis*) Native along river banks, streams and open prairies; clump-forming 3-4' tall, flowering in mid-summer with gently nodding seed heads resemble cultivated rye; remain attractive all winter; tends to flop in heavy soil; tends to self sow making it desirable for naturalizing but can be a nuisance in small gardens

Prairie Grasses for Sandy Soils

Sand Bluestem (*Andropogon hallii*)

Indian Ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*)

Sand Lovegrass (*Eragrostis trichoides*) Native to sandy soils with leafy upright flowering stems to 4' h; masses of airy, fine-textured seed heads in August; self sows manageably in loam and readily in sand but easily managed; early spring green appreciated; will be floppy in shady conditions or excess water

Purple Lovegrass, (*Eragrostis purpureascens*)

Hairy Grama (*Bouteloua hirsuta*)

Prairie Savannahs and Woodlands

Prairies are bordered by savannas or openings in woodland areas where the prairie meets the forest. Here on the Great Plains we had bur oak savannas, also called oak openings, consisting of sun-loving prairie species and forest species. The plants that grow in savannas and those that inhabit woodland areas are ideal for creating a prairie style garden in part shade to full shade areas of your property.

If you are in an area dominated by large shade trees it is possible to garden with the same benefits of prairie. Instead of mowing your lawn once a week, you mow once a year. For a savannah garden you quit raking leaves in the fall and let them drop into your beds. Knee-high islands of savannah grasses and wildflowers are surrounded by mowed areas of bluegrass or fescue to let your neighbors know that this is a “planned landscape”. All in all, your savannah garden will greatly benefit you and the environment. Once established these areas will not need watering, no mowing, no run-off and no poisons; all a great benefit to wildlife habitat that is disappearing at an alarming rate.

Most native sedges are clump forming, easy to grow and very adaptable to dry or wet shade or part sun. They are among the first plants to emerge and flower in the spring. After setting seed a quick haircut and a new flush of growth. The fine texture combines well with spring bulbs, or big bold leaved plants.

Grasses/Sedges for Shade—12”-36” h, 12”-24” w

Wildrye, Silky (*Elymus villosus*) will self-sow readily in open ground; glossy foliage, reaching 2’ high, topped with fine, rye-like seed heads.

Bottlebrush Grass (*Hystrix patula*) Cool season native bunch grass with shiny, green foliage to 2’ topped by bottle-brush like seed heads in June; grows to 3’; self sows but easily managed when allowed to weave between perennials; grows well in part shade too; best in informal settings.

Sea Oats, Northern (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) Upright bunchgrass to 3-4’ high with flattened spikelets topping the plants in summer; they start green then fade to a handsome bronze in winter; tendency to reseed heavily so plant in a confined space or scratch young seedlings out with a hoe; easy to grow in full sun or partial shade; tolerates dry shade very well.

Sedge, Appalachian (*Carex appalachica*)

Sedge, Bristleleaf (*Carex eburnea*)

Sedge, Common Wood (*Carex blanda*)

Sedge, Eastern Star (*Carex radiata*)

Sedge, Oak (*Carex albicans*)

Sedge, Pennsylvania (*Carex pennsylvanica*)

Sedge, Rosy (*Carex rosea*)

Sedge, Sprengel’s (*Carex sprengelii*)

Grasses/Sedges for Wet Areas

Cordgrass, Prairie (*Spartina pectinata*) Excellent 4-6’ grass with nice yellow fall color; very aggressive rhizomes; confine to restricted areas or you’ll regret it; difficult to cut back in spring; ‘Aureomarginata’ has yellow leaf margins. Ideal grown in large pots for pond plantings or a massed in low areas for storm water management.

Sedge, Bristly Cattail (*Carex squarrosa*)

Sedge Foxtail (*Carex vulpinoidea*)

Sedge, Fringed (*Carex crinata*)

Sedge, Gray’s (*Carex grayi*)

Sedge, Longhair (*Carex comosa*)

Sedge, Palm (*Carex muskingumensis*)

Sedge, Porcupine (*Carex hystericina*)

Sedge, Short's (*Carex shortiana*)

Sedge, Tussock (*Carex stricta*)

Sedge, Yellowfruit (*Carex annectens*)

Hardy Exotic Grasses

Reed Grass, Feather (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora*) Deep green, lustrous foliage with loosely feathered flowering stalks in early summer; they constrict to narrow buff-colored plumes by fall and remain attractive all winter; easy to grow in most soils, but best in well-drained fertile soils; native to Europe. 'Karl Foerster' is a popular selection for good reason; 'Overdam' has white-edge leaves and 'Avalanche' has white center stripe; 'Strica' earliest to bloom, very upright; very well-behaved grass.

Carex or Sedge Many exciting yellow and white variegated forms selected from plants native to Japan and China. many different grass-like plants in wide variety of color, form, and size for wet or moderately dry soils; best in dappled shade and combine nicely with hosta; great in container plantings too

'Ice Dancer' - has cream white leaf margins to 12" high.

'The Beatles' makes a deep green mop for groundcover, only 6" high.

'Evergold' - bright yellow variegation to 12"

Hair Grass, Tufted (*Deschampsia caespitosa*) The selection 'Northern Lights' has beautiful cream-variegated foliage on new growth and in cool weather; very fine, airy flower panicles appear in early summer; best in part-shade or rain gardens; 12-15" high.

Ribbon Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta*) A popular favorite for years with creamy-white stripes on leaves to 18" high; cool season aggressive spreader; plant in confined space and part shade.

Quaking Grass (*Briza media*) A 20" cool season grass with puffy oatlike seed heads rustling with the slightest breeze in spring; shear back by late summer for new flush of growth; durable and long-lived for full sun to part shade.

Fesque, Dwarf Blue (*Festuca glauca*) Lovely powder blue foliage and dainty flower spikes in early summer; compact size makes it ideal as a border plant or for the rock garden; must have full sun and good drainage to perpetuate in the garden; 'Elijah Blue' holds its color well throughout the season; 12" high.

Oatgrass, Blue (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) A winter-hardy European native; clump-forming grass with intense blue leaves to 2'; delicate flower stalks appear in late spring; Prefers full sun and good air movement to resist any foliar rust; requires well-drained soil for long life; suffers in poorly drained, clay soils; outstanding silver-blue is unrivaled among grasses.

Miscanthus or Maiden Grass Showy grasses of many shapes and sizes, ranging from 3 to 12' tall; feathery plumes top plants in fall with new cultivars providing colorful foliage and better flowers; cut back to ground in spring; prefers full sun and will topple if planted in too shady of conditions.

'Autumn Red' - 3-4' early bloomer with reddish-purple fall color;

'Gold Bar' - heavy gold striping; compact, upright habit 3-5' high;

'Morning Light' - white and green variegation; fine, narrow leaves; upright arching habit to 5' high.

'Strictus' - with yellow bands on the foliage;

'Gracillimus' - has reddish-pink seed heads; graceful arching habit

'Giganteus' - grows to 12' high!

'Variegata' - bright white and green variegation; strong arching habit; tolerates part-shade; grows to 6'.

'Zebrinus' - bright yellow bands on the foliage.

Ravennae Grass (*Saccharum ravennae*) Native to the Mediterranean region; clumping grass forming 4' wide gray-green mounds of foliage by August; large plummy flower heads are produced in late August on stalks up to 12' tall; excess moisture or fertility encourages lax growth; cut to ground in spring.

Moor Grass 'Skyracer', *Molina arundinacea*. This beautiful grass is noted for its 2-3' gray-green basal leaves and 7-8' stiff, upright stems and open flower panicles in fall; prefers some moisture in heat of summer; striking accent.

Moor Grass, Autumn (*Sesleria autumnalis*) This hardy European native forms basal clumps of yellow-green foliage to 12" high; blooms in mid-summer to 18 inches with narrow seed heads; full sun to part shade and moderately drought tolerant; great near a water feature.

Giant Sakaton, *Sporobolus wrightii* This southwestern native is also winter hardy to zone 4! Attractive waist high mounds of gray-green foliage by late summer; the feathery, branched seed heads rise to 6' in fall to create a great see-through affect; retains shape through winter with straw-colored leaves; moderately drought tolerant.

Reed Grass, Korean (*Calamagrostis brachytricha*) Native to woodland edge in Asia; glossy green foliage and red tinted feathery flower heads in September create strong vertical plant; the showy flowers fade to silvery green through fall; prefers consistent moisture but is easy to grow in most soils; excellent in containers; 3-4' high.

Pennisetum, Chinese (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) Easy to grow, narrow-leaved bunch grass with foxtail-like silvery-white or red plumes in late summer; 'Hamelin', 'Foxtrot', 'Karley Rose', 'Redhead' all good selections; typically 2-3' high; stunning in groups or masses; native to China.

Lyme Grass, Blue (*Leymus arenarius*) Native to European coastal sand dunes; impressive bright bluish foliage to 2'; spreads very aggressive in loose soils; best contained; tolerates dry soils.

Non-Hardy Exotic Grasses

Fountain Grass or Feathertop, *Pennisetum setaceum* or *P. villosum*

All of the following selections make outstanding container plants or focal point for bedding plants; drought and heat tolerant; Purple fountain grass has purple-red stem, leaf and flower color; New varieties 'Fireworks', 'Tall Tails' and 'Purple Majesty' highly ornamental; feathertop has showy white plumes.

Pink Muhly Grass, *Muhlenbergia capillaries*

This southwestern native offers rich green glossy basal foliage topped by masses of delicately branched flower panicles in late summer and early fall; looks like pink clouds; extremely drought and heat tolerant; 'White Cloud' is a stunning white form; grows up to 3' high and stunning in container gardens.

Mexican Feather Grass, *Nassella* or *Stipa tenuissima*

A cool season grass that is among the finest texture of any grass! A dense green fountain of hair-like leaves ending in silvery seed spikes by early summer. The plants becomes light straw-colored and remains attractive through winter. Usually not hardy but self-sows readily and easy to perpetuate in the garden.

Ruby Crystals Grass, *Melinis nerviglumis*, This little gem prefers the full, intense sun, takes very little water, even during establishment, and looks great from spring all the way through fall. It stays small, getting only about 18" h. Fine, olive green foliage clumps topped with rosy pink, softly textured seed heads that sway gently in the breeze.