



ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

LANDSCAPE · NURSERY · GARDEN CENTER

Ornamental grasses are useful for adding height, mass, texture and movement to the garden. In autumn, they often display showy colors of gold, bronze, pink, or burgundy. In winter, they add interest to areas otherwise devoid of form for many months of the year. They are relatively low-maintenance and require little attention during the growing season.

In this handout, ornamental grasses include true grasses, and related families of grass-like plants such as sedges and rushes. The plants are categorized by general height (dwarf, small, medium, large, and jumbo). A bold **N** at the end of a description indicates a native plant. Grasses that are not winter hardy and considered annuals are listed in a separate table.

DWARF 4 to 12 INCHES				
Name	Height	Exposure	Flowering Time	Description
Blue Fescue, Elijah Blue <i>Festuca glauca</i>	8-12"	○/◐	June	Clump forming. Densely tufted grass with stiff needle-like silver-blue foliage. Prefers, moist, well-drained soil. Durable and long-lived. Ideal for edging.
Fountain Grass, Little Bunny <i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i>	12-18"	○	July August	Clump forming. Small, fluffy white blooms resembling bunny tails. Miniature form of <i>Pennisetum</i> Hameln.
Fountain Grass, Piglet <i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i>	12-18"	○	July August	Clump forming. Similar to <i>P.</i> Little Bunny, but with much larger flowers.
Sedge, Blue <i>Carex glauca (flacca)</i>	6-12"	○/●	June	Spreading. Grows slowly into a mass of carnation-like blue-gray foliage. Can be cut back 3-4 times a season to encourage faster spread. Brown flowers in June hold until fall.
Sedge, Brome-like <i>Carex bromoides</i>	12-18"	○/◐	April May	Clump forming. Stiff foliage. Open clusters of flower spikelets in April and May. Thrives in boggy areas. N
Sedge, Pennsylvania <i>Carex pensylvanica</i>	8-12"	◐	May	Spreading. Slender green leaves with small insignificant flowers. Adaptable as lawn alternative or mowable groundcover (mowed as low as 2"). N
Sweet Flag, Variegated Gold <i>Acorus gramineus 'Ogon'</i>	1'	○/◐	N/A	Clump forming. Beautiful golden variegated foliage. Great for moist areas.
SMALL 1 to 2 FEET				
Fountain Grass, Hameln <i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i>	1-2'	○	July August	Clump forming. Dark green fine textured foliage and ivory white flowers. Neat, fountain-like habit. Yellow fall color.
Hakone, Golden <i>Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola'</i>	1-2'	◐	July	Clump forming. Resembles dwarf bamboo, with arching bright yellow leaves streaked with green. Pink-red foliage in the fall. Prefers moist, well-drained soil.
Japanese Blood Grass <i>Imperata cylindrica</i> 'Red Baron'	1-2'	○	N/A	Clump forming. Foliage emerges in spring green at the base and red at the tips. Ruby red leaf ends deepen to burgundy as the season progresses.
Moor Grass, Variegated <i>Molinia caerulea 'Variegata'</i>	1-2'	◐	July	Clump forming. Very graceful creamy white linear-stripped variegation. Showy purple-pink flowers bloom on long, stiff stems. Foliage turns golden yellow in fall.

Sun ○
6 hours direct sun

Partial Sun ◐
4 hours direct sun

Shade ●
Less than 3 hours direct sun

SMALL 1 to 2 FEET (cont)

Name	Height	Exposure	Flowering Time	Description
Prairie Dropseed, Tara <i>Sporobolus heterolepsis</i>	2'	○/◐	August September	Clump forming. Distinctly upright in habit, will not flop over. Very fine textured, glossy, medium green foliage turning deep orange in fall and coppery in winter.
Sedge, Evergold <i>Carex morrowii</i>	1-2'	◐/●	May	Clump forming. Arching foliage is yellow with a narrow green margin. Prefers damp woodland or somewhat shady, constantly moist areas.
Sedge, Ice Dance <i>Carex morrowii</i>	1-2'	◐	May	Slowly spreading. Forms low mounds of brightly variegated ½" wide foliage with strong creamy white margins on dark green leaves. Spreads by rhizomes but is not invasive.
Sedge, Variegated <i>Carex morrowii</i> 'Aureovariegata'	1-2'	○/◐	May	Clump forming. Coarse green foliage with creamy white leaf margin grows in gracefully arching clumps. Semi-evergreen. Great as low border.
Tufted Hair Grass <i>Deschampsia caespitosa</i>	1-2'	○/◐	July	Clump forming. Dense tufts of dark green foliage. Silvery green flowers bloom in loose, airy panicles. Tolerates a wide range of soil and light conditions, but performs best in moist, fertile soil in part shade.

MEDIUM 2 to 4 FEET

Blue Oat Grass <i>Helictotrichon sempervirens</i>	2-3'	○	June	Clump forming. Neat mounds of bright blue foliage. Oat-like flowers bloom on 12-18" stems. Prefers fertile, well-drained soil. Semi-evergreen.
Bluestem, Little <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	2-3'	○	August September	Clump forming. Slender blue-green foliage turning reddish-copper or purple in the fall. Tolerates heat and sandy soil. Prefers average soil. N
Bluestem, Little The Blues <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	2-3'	○	August September	Clump forming. Slender blue foliage intensifies then turns to deep red tones in the fall. Very showy form of the popular native.
Feather Reed Grass, Korean <i>Calamagrostis brachytricha</i>	3-4'	○/◐	September	Clump forming. Upright glossy green foliage with fuzzy, rose-purple flower spikes that fade to silver-gray. Foliage turns tan-bronze in fall. Blooms better in shade than most other grasses.
Feather Reed Grass, Karl Foerster <i>Calamagrostis arundinacea</i>	3-4'	○/◐	June	Clump forming. Strongly vertical form. Narrow, arching dark green foliage and early purple-bronze blooms fading to buff. Gold fall color. Thrives in damp, fertile soil. Attractive winter appearance.
Feather Reed Grass, Avalanche <i>Calamagrostis arundinacea</i>	3-4'	○/◐	June	Clump forming. Striking variegated form of Karl Foerster with a wide white band down the center of each leaf blade. Silvery tan flowers aging to golden tan. Prefers moist, rich soil. Tolerates some shade.
Fountain Grass <i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i>	3-4'	○	July August	Clump forming. Narrow green leaves turning golden yellow in fall. Dense, whitish-pink foxtail-like flowers bloom summer to fall.
Fountain Grass, Moudry <i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i>	2-3'	○	August September	Clump forming. Wide arching green foliage. Purplish black foxtail-like flowers bloom in late summer and persist well into fall.
Indian Grass <i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	3-4'	○	August September	Clump forming. Medium green leaves branch off at 45-degree angles. Feathery, tan-yellow flowers rise 2-3' above the foliage. Gold to orange fall color. N
Maiden Grass, Adagio <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	4-5'	○	August	Clump forming. Very narrow silver-gray foliage, turning yellow in fall. Pink flowers turning white with age. Improved form of Yaku Jima with more consistent flowering above the foliage.

MEDIUM 2 to 4 FEET (cont)

Name	Height	Exposure	Flowering Time	Description
Maiden Grass, Morning Light <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	4'	○	August September	Clump forming. Nearly white, this grass will glow in a mixed border. Slender green foliage with wide white edges and a slim green center.
Maiden Grass, Yaku Jima <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	3-4'	○	August September	Clump forming. Fine textured foliage and bronze-pink plumes turning silver and remaining attractive into the winter. Looks like a dwarf form of Gracillimus.
Northern Sea Oats <i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	2-3'	◐	August	Clump forming. Bright green, horizontal bamboo-like foliage. Unusual, oat-like flowers are held on slender nodding stems. Foliage turns vibrant red-bronze to copper tones in the fall, warming to a light salmon-buff color. N
Prairie Dropseed <i>Sporobolus heterolepsis</i>	2-3'	○/◐	August September	Clump forming. Elegant and refined prairie grass. Very fine textured, glossy, medium green foliage turning deep orange in fall and coppery in winter. Delicate creamy white inflorescences have the distinct fragrance of buttered popcorn. Yum! N
Rush, Corkscrew <i>Juncus effusus</i> 'Spiralis'	2-3'	○/◐	July August	Clump forming. Dark green twisted and spiraled foliage resembling cork screws. Loves very moist or wet, peaty soils. Fun accent for pond side.
Sedge, Bowles Golden <i>Carex elata</i>	2-3'	◐/●	May	Clump forming. Graceful, gold-stripped foliage with faint green stripes. Fantastic for brightening shady spots. Prefers moist soil.
Sedge, Palm Oehme <i>Carex muskingumensis</i>	2-3'	○/◐	May	Spreading. Tall stems with narrow, arching dark green leaves resembling palm fronds. Yellow fall color at first frost. Exotic in appearance and ideal for creating strong visual impact. Prefers moist soil. N
Sweet Flag, Variegated <i>Acorus gramineus</i> 'Variegatus'	2-3'	○	June	Spreading. Long narrow leaves with bold green and white bands, similar to <i>Iris ensata</i> 'Variegata'. <i>Acorus</i> makes a dramatic presentation as a specimen plant in water gardens or other constantly moist locations.
Switch Grass, Heavy Metal <i>Panicum virgatum</i>	3-4'	○	August	Clump forming. Very stiff, upright metallic blue foliage turning gold in the fall. Pink flowers turn into buff colored seed heads. Nice winter interest.
Switch Grass, Prairie Sky <i>Panicum virgatum</i>	3-4'	○	August	Clump forming. Bluest <i>Panicum</i> . Powdery blue foliage turning gold in fall. Less rigid, more arching habit than Heavy Metal.
Switch Grass, Red <i>Panicum virgatum</i> 'Rotstrahlbusch'	3-4'	○	August	Clump forming. Shortest <i>Panicum</i> . Red-tinged foliage turning bright red in fall. Airy, burgundy-red flower panicles develop high over the foliage.
Switch Grass, Shenandoah <i>Panicum virgatum</i>	3-4'	○	August	Clump forming. Green foliage becomes tinted dark red at the tips in July. Airy, burgundy-red flowers. Burgundy fall color. Improved form of Hanse Herms.
LARGE 5 to 7+ FEET				
Bluestem, Big <i>Andropogon gerardii</i>	5-8'	○	August September	Clump forming. Upright, lush wide green or blue-green foliage turning rich orange and copper-red in the fall then turning tan. Inflorescences open red and turn darker with age, vaguely resembling an upside down turkey foot. N
Flame Grass <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Purpurascens'	5-6'	○	August September	Clump forming. Upright, foliage deepens to red-burgundy when touched by frost. Silver flower plumes. Consistent red-orange fall color.
Maiden Grass, Cabaret <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	5-6'	○	September	Clump forming. Bold dark green and bright white variegated foliage. Reddish-pink flower plumes in early fall. Tolerates light shade.

LARGE 5 to 7+ FEET (cont)

Name	Height	Exposure	Flowering Time	Description
Maiden Grass, Cosmopolitan <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	5-6'	○	September	Clump forming. Broad green leaves with wide white margins, nearly the reverse of Cabaret, but flowers earlier. Blooms open coppery red then turn creamy white. Outstanding statuesque form.
Maiden Grass, Sarabande <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	5-6'	○/●	August	Clump forming. Fine textured, silver-green foliage. Coppery or gold plumes in fall. Similar to Gracillimus, but flowers earlier and reliably. Great winter form.
Maiden Grass, Silver Feather <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Silberfeder'	5-7'	○	August September	Clump forming. Arching, wide, rich green foliage with an attractive silver midrib. Large silvery white flower plumes persist well into winter.
Maiden Grass, Variegated <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Variegatus'	5-6'	○/●	September	Clump forming. Striped leaves of bright white and green form loose, often flopping clumps. Flowers in late summer. Foliage turns beige-brown in fall.
Porcupine Grass <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Strictus'	5-6'	○	September	Clump forming. Narrower and more upright than Zebra grass. The stiffly upright leaves resemble porcupine quills. Coppery plumes in fall.
Ravenna Grass or Hardy Pampas Grass <i>Erianthus ravennae</i>	7-8'	○	August	Clump forming. Medium gray-green foliage turns brown in fall with tints of purple and orange. Showy pinkish flower plumes turning silver on stalks up to 12' tall. Prefers moist soil.
Switch Grass, Cloud Nine <i>Panicum virgatum</i>	5-7'	○	August September	Clump forming. Upright grower with metallic blue-green foliage and amazing clouds of reddish-brown flowers turning creamy gold. Dark gold fall foliage. Remains upright through winter.
Switch Grass, Dallas Blues <i>Panicum virgatum</i>	5-6'	○	September	Clump forming. Wide, silvery blue-green leaves with pastel mauve-purple blooms rising almost two feet above the foliage. Rusty brown fall foliage turning warm tan in winter.
Switch Grass, Northwind <i>Panicum virgatum</i>	5-6'	○	August September	Clump forming. Strongly vertical form. Wide olive-green foliage and airy panicles of gold flowers. Golden yellow fall foliage. Tolerates snow loads particularly well. Wisconsin selection.
Zebra Grass <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Zebrinus'	5-6'	○/●	September	Clump forming. Broad, arching, distinctive green foliage with horizontal yellow bands throughout the blade. Reddish-copper plumes and beige-brown foliage in fall. Moist soil.

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Black Mondo Grass <i>Ophiopogon planiscapus</i> 'Nigrescens'	10-12"	○/●	July	Slowly spreading. Unique black foliage makes for great contrast in container plantings or as an accent in the border. Small, bell-shaped light pink flowers.
Pampas Grass <i>Cortaderia selloana</i>	8-12'	○	August September	Clump forming. Rapid growing, arching bright green foliage. Huge and dramatic creamy white flower plumes. Prefers well-drained soil with plenty of moisture. Attractive winter interest.
Purple Fountain Grass <i>Pennisetum setaceum</i> 'Rubrum'	3-4'	○	July	Clump forming. Upright, arching deep burgundy foliage topped with red to purple foxtail-like plumes. Dark red to purple fall color. Moist soil. Great winter interest.
Sedge, Leatherleaf <i>Carex buchannii</i>	1-2'	○/●	N/A	Clump forming. Unusual tawny copper-brown foliage. Beautiful contrast in the border or used in containers.

WHERE TO USE GRASSES

Placement is the most important consideration in growing grasses successfully and displaying them to their best advantage. In most cases, grasses over 3 feet tall require full sun. Sun-loving grasses will not develop into the gorgeous specimens you see in pictures if grown in shade. If you happen to have more shade than sun, choose species that have shown shade tolerance or preference. To achieve the full ornamental effect of grasses, orientation is paramount. They show best when backlit, meaning when sunlight passes through them from behind. The movement that wind creates also accentuates the beauty of grasses.

Established grasses will tolerate a wide range of conditions. For the most part, average garden soil will do. If you have extremely dry soil, native prairie species will probably do best. In sites with periodic standing water, *Saccharum*, rushes, and many of the sedges can cope.

Grasses for Shady Sites: For most grasses, an insufficient amount of sun is intolerable. Here are the exceptions.

- **Feather Reed Grass** - minimum of 4 hours of direct sun per day
- **Sedge** – prefers light shade
- **Northern Sea Oats** - prefers light shade
- **Hakone Grass** - prefers light shade or woodland conditions
- **Moor Grass** – prefers light or part shade

WATERING

New plants should be watered during the dry summer months until established. Usually, a good deep soaking once or twice a week will suffice. Be sure to water deeply to encourage a healthy, deep root system. Avoid relying on a sprinkler system, as it tends to provide water at frequent, but brief intervals. After the first year when your grasses are well rooted, they are usually quite happy with natural rainfall. If the weather is dry, supplemental watering of 1" per week is recommended.

MAINTENANCE

Grasses seldom need any maintenance. Occasionally they look better if older leaves are trimmed off as they become tattered, but many types do not need their leaves removed as they die back each fall. During the fall and winter, grasses may remain standing to provide fall color and winter interest. In late March before new growth appears, cut back old standing grass to six inches with pruners or electric shears. Removing old growth keeps the plant looking tidy. Smaller grasses such as fescue and *Carex* can be tidied up by gently raking up last year's growth.