

## Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses add interest to the garden year round, but are particularly effective in winter. Many species turn color in winter, from rich harvest tans and browns, to deep burgundy and maroon. Others are variegated: green and white or yellow, with bands or stripes.

Their forms are quite varied, consisting of low mounding, dense, spreading, tall and vase-shaped. The foliage textures range from soft to quite coarse and spiky. A nice added benefit of ornamental grasses is their motion and sound. The wind can provide movement and rustling. The seed heads provide strong visual interest. As you can see, grasses offer you the ability to involve all your senses in the garden, better than any other plant group. The tactile experience of grasses is one of their strong points.

One of the best qualities about ornamental grasses is they don't have to be mown. They should, however, be cut back in late winter or early spring, just as they are coming out of dormancy. Do not cut back to ground level, but leave four to six inches of height. Leaving old foliage on plants can delay new growth and development by several weeks. Trimming too close to the ground can also stunt growth. As grass clumps get older, they may have a tendency to die out in the center. This means it is time to renovate the plant by digging, removing the dead area, dividing and replanting.

When planting grasses one should consider the desired height, as these grasses can range in size from just a few inches to fifteen feet. Most grasses will grow where other plants don't necessarily thrive, such as poor and clay soils. Some prefer a wet environment, while others a more arid one. Most enjoy full sunlight, so check out your grasses before planting. All grasses can benefit from light fertilizing during the growing season.

Most grasses are generally pest free and it is hard for weeds to get established in a healthy clump of grass. Birds really enjoy grasses, eating the seeds and using the leaves as nest building material and hiding places.

Some uses for grasses might include container planting, borders, screening, ground cover, or specimen planting. They particularly look good near water. So plant away and enjoy!

## Sources

For great color photos and companion planting ideas see: For Your Garden, *Ornamental Grasses* by Rick Darke  
For container planting suggestions and local sources of plant material see: *Sunset Magazine*, September 2001, page 100, "Grasses for Containers" by Steven R. Lorton



Photo by J.W. Gillies

*Calamagrostis actiflora* 'Karl Foerster'

For a list of over fifty grasses, descriptions, botanical names, and USDA zones, see The Garden Helper's page [How to Grow and Care for Ornamental Grasses](#)



Photo by J.W. Gillies

*Briza media* 'Trembling Hearts'



Photo by J.W. Gillies

*Festuca cinerea* 'Elija's Blue'



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*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln'