



Ornamental Grasses in the Landscape

Ornamental grasses exhibit tremendous diversity in form and color and are useful in virtually any garden setting. From coastal sand dunes to bog gardens, grasses thrive and contribute texture and a wide array of colors. As specimens, they are slender and graceful, yet bold. Useful as ground covers, hedges or screens, they serve a utilitarian function. Their effect in the winter landscape is dazzling. In addition to these particular merits, ornamental grasses are low in maintenance, easy to cultivate, virtually disease and insect-free, and are seldom eaten by deer.

For the average gardener, familiarity with ornamental grasses is often limited to large, plume-like specimens. Large grasses are indeed dramatic in the landscape, providing one has ample space. Grasses under 12 inches in height, on the other hand, may provide an unusual accent in any garden border. *Hakonechloa macra* 'Albo-aurea', for instance, produces dense clumps of long arching deciduous leaves, variegated a creamy yellow. Planted individually or as a mass, this ten-inch high grass is always tidy in appearance and never invasive. Its delicate flowers are produced from August to October.

Sedges, *Carex* species, are short grasses that come in a wide variety of forms. *Carex morrowii* 'Evergold,' Japanese Sedge Grass, is a densely tufted grass, growing to nearly a foot high. An evergreen with a distinct gold stripe down the center of each leaf, it requires adequate moisture. When planted in large drifts, this grass will form a weed proof patch.

Festuca ovina 'Glauca,' Blue Fescue, (Figure 1) creates an entirely different effect in the garden border with its unique foliage. Its finely textured silvery blue evergreen leaves are among the most brilliant of all grasses. When planted en

masse, this grass gives the garden a neat, unique appearance as it is only six to eight inches in height. Its flowers are best cut when faded and, if planted closely, it can be mowed like a lawn in spring and mid-summer to foster growth of the youngest, bluest shoots.

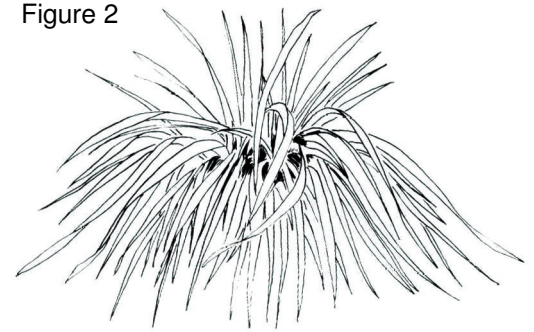
Figure 1



The placement of medium height grasses is not limited to the middle of the perennial bed. They may also serve as ground covers or as specimen plants under a wide variety of growing conditions. Consider for instance a grass that grows in full sun and is also capable of thriving in damp places of semi-shade. *Deschampsia caespitosa*, Tufted Hair Grass, is not only exceptional for its ability to adapt to a wide variety of growing conditions, but is also an outstanding garden specimen throughout the year. The huge feathery flowers borne amongst finely textured foliage make this plant one of the most delicate of all grasses. The flowers that bloom from June through August remain intact well into the winter. Its evergreen foliage, three feet in height, is also effective all winter.

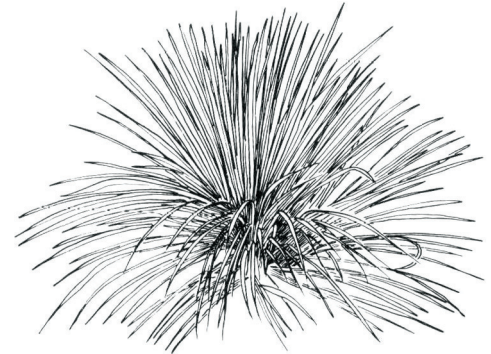
Elymus arenarius, Blue Lyme Grass, (Figure 2) a grass of 24 inches, is a native of coastal sand dunes. The distinctive features of this plant are its blue leaves and its aggressive nature. Because of its ability to form large colonies, it is extremely useful in sandy areas and on banks for soil erosion control. In richer soils it will not spread as quickly but will certainly thrive, providing there is full sun. A blue-leafed grass that is not aggressive is *Helictotrichon sempervirens*, Blue Oat Grass (Figure 3). It forms a nice tufted clump between two and three feet tall. The attractive foliage combines nicely with other plants in a perennial border.

Figure 2



The invasive character of *Phalaris arundinacea* 'Picta,' Ribbon Grass makes this plant inappropriate for most garden situations, but it may be considered an asset when a ground cover or bank binder is desired. Growing to five feet, its leaves are longitudinally variegated green and white. Ribbon Grass will spread rapidly in wet or dry conditions.

Figure 3



Pennisetum alopecuroides, Fountain Grass, (Figure 4) is one of the most popular and graceful of all ornamental grasses. As its name suggests, its flower heads gracefully arch outward over loosely tufted foliage as spray from a fountain. From late August through October, pinkish flowers rise above narrow leaves, which depending on variety, may be six inches to three feet in height. In the late fall, the flowers shatter and the foliage turns yellow. *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Moudry' has dark, almost black flowers with a wider leaf blade than other varieties. The nearly black flowers provide a stunning contrast to the green leaf blades. Fountain grasses, 'Moudry' in particular, have a tendency to sprout abundantly from seed and may become weedy.

Figure 4



For boldness in the landscape, the tall grasses, growing three to 20 feet or more, are unsurpassed. In single or clump plantings at the back of the border, these grasses provide a striking vertical accent. As specimens, many of the larger grasses are quite sensational. If a hedge or screen is desired, vigorously growing grasses are suitable. The hardy species of *Miscanthus* are among the finest of the taller ornamental grasses. Huge flower heads are borne upon sturdy, wind resistant stems and are attractive all winter.

Miscanthus' medium-fine textured foliage is a pleasing gold in the winter landscape, as well. Small varieties of *Miscanthus*, such as 'Adagio', 'Little Kitten' and 'Little Zebra' grow two to four feet tall and are used as many of the shorter grasses above. Medium varieties that reach four to six feet are also available.

The 'Gracillimus', 'Variegatus', and 'Zebrinus' cultivars of *Miscanthus sinensis*, are all useful as hedges. 'Zebrinus', Zebra Grass, in particular, with horizontal bands of yellowish white on its leaves and erect stems at the lower half of the plant, creates a striking hedge. 'Gracillimus', Maiden Grass, has a slender habit,

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slightly curled leaves and flower. Growing to only four feet, it makes a charming isolated specimen as well. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Variegatus,' Striped Eulalia Grass, displays narrow foliage variegated pure white on the edges. It is a vigorous grower, very hardy, and may be planted as a specimen, in a group, as a screen or by the water's edge. 'Zebrinus' and 'Variegatus' will reach six to seven feet.

A grass with attractive yellow foliage in winter is *Panicum virgatum* (Figure 5). The panicum cultivar 'Rubrum' has red foliage in autumn into winter. Panicum cultivars vary in size from three to six feet. The flowers are a dark red-purple, fading to a light tan. The flowers are held in a panicle, giving a very open, airy effect.

Gardeners experimenting with ornamental grasses in the landscape are seldom disappointed. There are hundreds of varieties to choose from and the amount of effects that can be produced are limitless. Availability is generally not a problem, since most garden centers carry many different types of grasses.

Illustration Credit: Cornell Information Bulletin 64, "Ornamental Grasses for the Home and Garden"

Resource: Lois Woodhall, The Plantage Inc., Cutchogue, N.Y.

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Hort 213 12/10

Figure 5

