



## Ornamental Grasses

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Ornamental grasses are a unique group of plants that have become very popular in home gardens, city parks and commercial landscapes. They range in size from 6 inches tall to 8 feet tall and can be grown in conditions ranging from dry shade to full sun, woodland to prairie, and in bogs and ponds. Ornamental grasses include grasslike plants called sedges and rushes.

Grasses can be categorized many ways but are often grouped into cool and warm seasons. Knowing whether the grass is a cool season grass or a warm season grass will give you information on the seasonal growth pattern and necessary maintenance needed for that grass. Cool season grasses will start to grow in late winter or early spring just like our cool season turf grasses, which grow early in the year and taper off in the heat of the summer. *Calamagrostis* and *Deschampsia* are both cool season grasses. Prune cool season grasses to ground level in late winter or early spring before they start growing. Warm season grasses don't need pruning until late spring or early summer. *Miscanthus* are warm season grasses that may look brown for months due to their late start. They can be cut back at a more leisurely rate. Grasses may also be classified as evergreen or deciduous. Knowing which a grass is will also tell you whether it should be cut back or will be 'evergreen' all year long. Blue Oat Grass and many of the *Carex* and *Fescue* grasses should not be cut back at all. You can clean out the old leaves of evergreen grasses in the spring by simply raking through them.

Grasses can also be grouped into clumping or running grasses. Clumping types form thick mounds that increase in girth. Running grasses spread by vigorous rhizomes and can be invasive. *Phalaris* or Ribbon Grass is a common running grass.

### DESIGN ATTRIBUTES

Due to the diversity of size, colors and textures, you can find a spot for an ornamental grass in almost any landscape situation. Grasses are the one of the few groups of perennial plants that can be enjoyed year round. They are outstanding in the winter as they add movement and provide structure to collect frost and snow.

Grasses usually look their best when grouped with other plants. However, they can be massed together to form screens, hedges or edges. A single clump of grass can act as a specimen to flank an entrance or as a punctuation mark in the middle of an existing bed.

Grasses extend the perennial bed by filling in between flowering plants. Some provide beautiful, graceful seedheads that move in a gentle breeze. Others do not flower at all, and yet provide interesting foliage color or texture.

### **BUYING AND PLANTING**

Grasses can be purchased in almost any size pot. They can readily be found in most retail nurseries and many mail-order nurseries. Be sure to check the zone listed on the tag to be sure it is hardy for this area. Some of the varieties are so new that hardiness has yet to be accurately established, so you may have lasting success with “non-hardy” grasses.

Grasses do best when planted in the spring so they have a chance to develop over the summer. There are both sun and shade-loving grasses. Be sure to plant them in appropriate environments. For example, planting a huge sun-loving *Miscanthus* in the shade will result in a disappointing performance when it flops over. Grasses often do better when planted in lean (soil low in organic matter and fertilizer) conditions and not over watered.

### **CARE AND MAINTENANCE**

Grasses are relatively pest free, and they are deer resistant! Evergreen grasses will benefit from a light layer of mulch applied during the coldest winter months.

Deciduous grasses should be cut down to approximately 4 to 8 inches above the soil surface. They can be cut down in the fall, but leaving them up until late winter will add special appeal to the winter garden and supply birds with seed from their heads. They do need to be cut back **before** new growth begins.

The foliage of many of the warm season varieties collapses by late spring and can be cut down to improve the appearance of the planting bed. As plants develop, their centers may die out. This is a perfect time to divide them. Dig up all or part of the clump. Cut pie-shaped pieces with a knife or axe, separate into small divisions, and replant. Spring is generally the best time to divide grasses.