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Ornamental grasses gaining modern popularity

By **Connie Cottingham**

Correspondent

Although ornamental grasses seem fairly new here, they have been popular in Europe, especially Germany, for much longer.

Kurt Bluemel, a nurseryman, and Wolfgang Oehme, a German-born landscape architect, have been two strong advocates for the use of ornamental grass as a design element in landscapes for decades.

Hot, dry seasons may convince us these tough beauties do have a place in our landscapes. Several grasses have been introduced by Kurt Bluemel, Inc. Nursery (2740 Greene Lane, Baldwin, MD 21013-9523), which is an excellent source for hard-to-find and unusual specimens.

Many ornamental grasses are available in area nurseries. With drought tolerance, year-round interest, little debris, and a large selection, grasses should be incorporated into the landscape with perennials and shrubs.

Grasses provide a texture and color contrast against evergreen shrubs in winter and a soft green background for blooming plants in summer.

In perennial beds, grasses can provide an upright form and help blend colors together.

Large grasses can be used to break up expanses of fence or screen A/C units.

A combination of grasses with daylilies do not require edging or weeding - just mow up to them. Provide a thick mulch around a new planting to give them a head start against weeds. Once established, they can stand their ground.

Plant container-grown grasses at the same soil level they were growing in the container. Bare root plants should have the crowns slightly elevated, like you would plant strawberries. When dividing larger grasses (about every three years, but they can tolerate a longer period), you may need to use an ax or chain saw.

Below is a sampler of ornamental grasses available (there are hundreds).

Each one has the botanical name and hardiness zones listed. Although their "blooms" are described, ornamental grasses really produce inflorescence, or seed clusters, not traditional flowers.

Small Ornamental Grasses

Blue Fescue (*Festuca cinerea* syn. *Festuca ovina* glauca) is a 6-inch clump, shaped like a little sea urchin. It's often recommended as a groundcover.

The clumping growth habit will never create an even texture in a large mass, but the spring blooms in mass make quite a statement. I prefer using Blue Fescue as an accent or edging plant. The blue color combines well with grays, the super-fine texture contrasts with almost everything.

Sweet Flag (*Acorus gramineus*) is a wetland perennial that can adapt to drier conditions. It has iris-like foliage and comes in a variegated form. Great for a pond edge or constantly moist site.

Ribbon Grass, or Gardener's Garters (*Phalaris arundinacea* 'Picta', zones 4-9) is a very invasive groundcover that is semi-evergreen here. Although invasive is a negative trait in a small bed it works for awkward narrow spaces, like a 6-inch strip between a concrete walk and a wall, and takes some shade. It's variegated foliage looks great next to deep greens, or the *Chrysanthemum pacificum* and works great in flower arrangements. 'Feeseey's Form' has new growth that has red blush to the variegated foliage. This grass does prefer rich, moist soil.

Japanese Blood Grass (*Imperata* 'Red Baron', zones 6-9) is 1- to 2-feet-tall with no inflorescence and intense red foliage. It will take part shade.

The Miniature Fountain Grasses (*Pennisetum* 'Little Bunny' and 'Honey', zones 6-9) have fluffy blooms on clumps only 8 to 12 inches high.

Mid-Size

Quaking Grass (*Briza media*, zones 4-8) is an 18-inch clump, with 3-foot-tall blooms that look like oats. The early summer blooms are dyed and used in arrangements as a filler.

Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*, zones 6-9) is one of the easiest ornamental grasses to find. It looks great in mass and blends well with perennials. This 3- to 4-foot-tall grass blooms in summer. Fountain grasses are available that grow 1 to 2 feet, such as 'Hameln,' or have pink, white, or black inflorescence. Purple fountain grass is not a reliable perennial for our area, but is a fun plant to grow as an annual or in containers.

Red Switch Grass (*Panicum virgatum*, zones 5-9) is 3- to 4-feet tall. The airy blooms appear in summer and the foliage turns red in fall.

Little Blue Stem (*Andropogon scoparius*, zones 4-9) Blue-green color and upright form seems to make this grass one of the darlings of garden writers.

Tall Grasses

Hardy Pampas Grass or Ravenna Grass (*Erianthus ravennae*, zones 5-9) gets 8- to 10-foot tall and produces plume-like blooms. It looks similar to Pampas grass, but the bloom is not as large and it will survive cold weather.

True Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*, zone 8-10) has showy plumes 8 feet in the air. This is about as far north as this plant will grow.

'Rosea' has pink blooms. This plant truly commands attention.

The Miscanthus Grasses

Kurt Blumel, Inc. Nursery offers over 50 different Miscanthus. Most are more than 5 feet tall; the range is 3- to 10-feet. Most take full sun, have narrow leaves and a clumping form, and produce blooms one or more feet above the foliage.

Maiden Grass (*Miscanthus gracillimus*, zones 6-9) This grass catches the breeze. It blooms in October and keeps its form all winter. Almost all area nurseries carry this one. Mine matured into a clump 5 feet tall (more than six in bloom) and about the same across.

Silver Variegated Maiden Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light', zones 5-9) is 4- to 5-feet tall, with silver edged foliage that catch the light.

Porcupine Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Strictus', zone 6-9) and **Zebra Grass** (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus', zone 6-9) both grow 6- to 8-feet tall with horizontal stripes. Zebra grass blooms later than Porcupine Grass (September blooms). Both work well at the edge of a pond.

Giant Chinese Silver Grass (*Miscanthus floridulus* syn. *M. giganteus*), an 8- to 10-foot-tall plant with wider leaves resembling bamboo, is one I want to try.

'Adagio' is a dwarf *Miscanthus*, maturing at 2 feet tall.

Once you start with grasses, exploring sedges (which can take more shade), rushes and clump-forming (non-invasive) bamboos is your next step.

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