

Ornamental Grasses

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Ornamental grasses are becoming quite popular with gardeners. They add texture and interest to the garden, and when combined with a gentle breeze, the garden comes to life with sound and motion. The smaller, clump forming grasses are valued as accent plants, while the larger ornamental grasses such as *Miscanthus* varieties are useful for their architectural stature, and combine well with evergreen shrubs to create a privacy screen.

The graceful, arching foliage of grasses display rich colors over a long season. Greens and blues are common in the summer, followed by rich, autumnal colors in fall and winter. Most have seedpods, flowerheads or plumes that dry well and last into winter. Leave the seedpods and plumes on the plants to add interest to the garden over winter, or cut them for long-lasting indoor arrangements.

Ornamental grasses need full sun and well-drained soil. They are a good choice for busy gardeners because they require little or no pruning, they are resistant to most insects, and they tolerate drought well. Deciduous grasses are cut back in mid- to late winter to make room for new growth.

Grasses are generally classified as cool-season or warm-season. Cool season grasses start to grow as soon as the temperature rises above freezing in the spring. At this time, they often have their brightest foliage. By early-summer, they are flowering and growth slows. Cool season grasses combine beautifully with small spring bulbs like *Scilla* or tulips. They are a good choice for areas with an extremely short growing season

Cool season grasses are not happy being transplanted during hot weather because their roots are not growing then. However they transplant very well in the spring and fall.

Warm season ornamental grasses, on the other hand, start to grow much later in the Spring. You may even be fooled into thinking they have died! Flowering commences in mid to late summer and continues until frost. Warm season grasses look great late in the season, but they can also play a role in the spring garden. Some grasses will start to grow just in time to mask the foliage from the earlier display of tulips.

Warm season grasses require warm soil temperatures for about 2 weeks before they start to grow in the spring. They do not like to have their roots disturbed when the soil is cold. Therefore they should not be dug for transplanting before they are showing signs of growth. They are very picky about this! Also, once they start to form blossoms, they are past their season for digging.

When choosing grasses you may want to have a mix of warm and cool season grasses, so as to provide interest from spring to fall. Plant cool season grasses in front of warm season grasses in a border, rather than planting warm season in front of warm season grasses. The area will be rather bare as you wait for the plants to poke their heads out of the ground.

Ornamental Grasses for Zone 4

There is actually a long list of zone 4 grasses. I will share some of my favourites.

Blue Oat Grass

The first is Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) (pronounced hel-ik-toh-TREE-kon sem-per-VEYE-renz)

Blue oat grass, is a cool season, clump-forming grass with steel-blue foliage. This is an award-winning plant that won the Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society in 1993 and was selected for Great Plant Picks in 2004. This ornamental grass is grown for its 20 inch long blue foliage which goes from one half inch wide to down to a point. It is very similar to the smaller blue fescue and both are from the same family.

In milder areas the foliage will persist into the winter providing some winter interest with its blue foliage poking through small amounts of snow. Where temperatures are more severe the foliage may turn brown, but it will revive in the spring.

Blue oat is fully hardy to zone 4. Plant in full sun to light shade in order to get that imposing color. As with most of the grasses blue oat grass tolerates drought once established. In extremely dry weather it could be watered down to the root depth once every couple of weeks. Although it grows in a wide range of soil, good drainage is essential .

This is an easy plant to care for, grows at an average rate and has no significant insect pests or diseases other than crown rot that occurs in poorly drained soils. Propagate blue oat grass by division in the spring or grow from seed. Blue oat does flower during the period of June through August. While many gardeners prefer to grow this plant for the foliage, I love the flowers swaying in the breeze over the summer months.

This small ornamental grass has many landscape uses, with a color and texture few plants have. It makes a nice addition to the perennial border, particularly as a contrast to green-leaved plants. Use it as a single accent plant in the smaller garden or rock garden, grow it in masses for a fine-textured drift, or try it in a container.

It combines well with Russian sage, blanketflower, Sedum 'Autumn Joy' and other, more upright ornamental grasses. Use it to mirror the blue foliage of blue spruce, blue junipers or blue-flowering perennials such as campanula, lavender, or blue mist spirea. For a more dramatic effect, try combining it with plants with deep maroon leaves like canna lilies.

Flame Grass *Miscanthus sinensis var. purpurascens*

Flame Grass features bold plumes of coral pink flowers rising above the foliage in late summer. It's grassy leaves are green in colour. As an added bonus, the foliage turns a gorgeous coppery bronze in the fall. The silver seed heads are carried on showy plumes displayed in abundance from early fall right through to late winter. The brick red stems are very effective and add winter interest.

Flame Grass is an herbaceous, warm season ornamental grass with a clump-forming habit, spreading slowly and growing to 4 - 5 feet tall. It is hardy to zone 4 and prefers full sun or bright shade to get the most out of the fall colours. The most important thing when growing this grass is to ensure that it receives ample moisture, especially in hot dry Ontario summers.

As with most grasses this plant is low maintenance and generally pest and disease free. Leave the plumes over the winter to provide interest in the winter garden. Cut back in the early spring to about 6" above the crown of the plant. Divide when you see the first signs of life in the spring up until the plant is 18" tall.

Flame grass partners well with Rudbeckia, Sedum and Asters.

***Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' - Feather Reed Grass**

Calamagrostis x acutiflora 'Karl Foerster' is a long-blooming, low maintenance, long-lived perennial grass for full sun to partial shade. This grass grows best in well-drained fertile soils with sufficient moisture, but will tolerate heavier clay soils and drier sites. Fertilizer may be required to produce maximum height. Low fertility will result in shorter plants. It is usually free of serious disease or insect problems although a foliar rust disease can occur in wet summers in situations with poor air circulation. Little maintenance is required except to cut back the stems to about 6 inches in late winter or early spring. In areas with mild winters the foliage may remain evergreen. This ornamental grass is a cool-season grass, which allows planting or

transplanting in spring or fall. Sterility eliminates any chance of this cultivar becoming an invasive plant or create unwanted seedlings in the garden. Many have described this grass as the "perpetual motion grass." The slightest breeze sets this grass in motion. The graceful movement is a highlight for any landscape. It is excellent as a specimen plant or providing a vertical accent in the landscape. Feather reed grass is useful in patio pot containers but best to transplant into the garden in the fall to ensure survival. In heavy rain or wind the stems will dip and droop in all directions but return to vertical as soon as the storm passes. A combination of Karl Foerster feather reed grass with various other perennials makes a dramatic effect in the landscape. Consider combinations with late summer and fall-blooming perennials such as *Coreopsis*, *Echinacea*, *Liatris*, and *Rudbeckia*. It is understandable why *Calamagrostis xacutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' is one of the best-selling ornamental grasses year after year.