

Ornamental Perennial Grasses

Ornamental grasses create movement & shape, animating the most basic of garden borders without sacrificing structure. Attractive, yet highly adaptable, grasses prove tolerant of most garden soils & even grow in partial shade. For a change, cut them back in spring, or late fall, if winter display is of little consequence; or enjoy the many varieties all year-round. The low-maintenance lifestyle of this distinct group of perennials lends to its growing popularity in gardens throughout B. C.

From blue foliage to a bright flame of red, grasses offer wide variety from which to choose. To aid you in your selection process, GARDENWORKS has divided the following handout into groups based on height. The most popular grasses will appear on this list.

SHORT GRASSES

~ Height less than 46cm (18") ~

Briza media Quaking Grass

Forms a low tuft of green leaves & delicate loose clusters of heart shaped flowers appear in late May. Looks superb when combined with Heaths & Heathers. Prefers: full-sun, & lean well-drained soil. Height 25-45cm (10-18") Spread 30cm (12")

Carex morrowii Variegated Japanese Sedge

Wonderful for brightening up a damp shady area. The cascading tufts of creamy white & green foliage work well with Sedums & Euphorbia. Looks terrific in containers. Prefers: full-sun or shade, & rich, moist soil. Height 30cm (12") Spread 15-30cm (6-12")

Festuca ovina 'Glauca' Blue Fescue

Low tufts of steely-blue foliage produce tan coloured spikes in late spring. They look great in containers & colour best in full sun. Popular as an edging, or massed to create a low, hummocky groundcover. Prefers: full-sun or part-shade, & average well-drained soil. Spread: 8-12"

Imperata cylindrica 'Red Baron' Japanese Blood Grass

Striking, upright grass spreads slowly to form a medium-sized clump, excellent for massing. The dramatic foliage is green at the base and blood-red on top making it superb alongside blue conifers and yellow-flowering perennials. Be sure to protect this one from the winter cold. Prefers: full-sun or part-shade, & moist, well-drained soil. Height 45cm (18") Spread 30cm (12")

Molinia caerulea 'Variegata' Variegated Moor Grass

Distinct creamy-yellow variegation adorns this beauty's foliage. More compact foliage with persistent & showy purple flowers. A most desirable small ornamental grass for the lightly shaded perennial border. Prefers: full-sun, & moist, fertile, acid soil. Height 30-45cm (12-18") Spread 30-45cm (12-18") Flowers reach 15-30cm (6-12") above foliage.



MEDIUM-SIZED GRASSES

~ Height between 46cm-92cm (18"-36") ~

Carex buchananii Leatherleaf Sedge

Delicate strands of bronze foliage form a tufted arching fountain; a superb contrast next to dwarf conifers or other evergreens. It also looks splendid beside water. Prefers: full-sun or shade, & rich, moist soil. Height 45cm+ Spread 30cm (12")

Chasmanthium latifolium Northern Sea Oats

This clumping grass is absolutely magnificent, treasured for its showy, dangling flower spikes & rich bamboo-like foliage. Both foliage & flowers mature from a saturated lime green in spring to a soft copper in fall. Performs well in full sun but is particularly valued for its shade tolerance. Prefers: full-sun or shade, & rich, moist soil. Height 76-90cm (30-36") Spread 30cm (12")

Pennisetum alopecuroides Fountain Grass

The bluff-coloured flowerheads on this grass resemble large foxtails, and appear as early as July. Medium-sized clumps of cascading green foliage turns bright almond in the fall. Blooms best in a warm location. Prefers: Full sun, & average, well-drained soil. Height 30-90cm (12-30") Spread 60-90cm (24-30")

Stipa gigantea Giant Feather Grass

One of the showiest & most spectacular of all flowering grasses. The narrow, arching, rolled leaves form dense tufts. In May flower stalks arch up and out from the grey-green foliage. This plant is most stunning when the airy sheaves of yellowish flowers shimmer & dance in the breeze. Prefers: Full sun, & fertile well-drained soil. Height 60cm (24") Spread 60cm (24") (flowers reach 3-4' above foliage)

Stipa tenuissima Mexican Feather Grass

This compact species forms a low clump of fine hair-like bright green foliage. In mid-summer spikes of bearded silky-green flowers appear slowly changing into attractive golden-blond plumes. Like other stipas this one dances in the slightest breeze proving to be showy from June all the way into late fall. Prefers: Full sun, & fertile well-drained soil. Height/Spread: 18-24"/12"

TALL GRASSES

~ height greater than 92cm (36") ~

We have listed the following cultivated varieties of *Miscanthus* with brief descriptions of their appearance & unique features. All bear autumn puffs of flower heads holding their shape well into winter. These blooms appear to float with the wind & are most suitable at the back of the border (with the exception of dwarf varieties). You can create a lovely contrast in the garden by planting *Miscanthus* with evergreens.

Miscanthus sacchariflorus 'Robusta' Giant Silver Grass
This very tall grass has a bamboo-like tropical appearance, quickly forming a patch of tall, stout corn-like stems & graceful arching foliage. In autumn the silvery plumes mature to a red, as the foliage turns to an attractive reddish-orange. Prefers: Full sun or part shade, & rich, moist to wet soil. Height 1.8 m (6') Spread 90cm (3')

Miscanthus sinensis Japanese Silver Grass
This is one of the most graceful & self-defining of all Ornamental grasses. Prefers: Full sun or part shade, & moist, well-drained soil. Spread 90cm 3' (following varieties vary in height)

M. sinensis 'Gracillimus' Maiden Grass
Fine-textured, long, narrow green foliage & a graceful arching overall form. The copper-red flower heads open in late September. Height 1.2-1.8m (4-6')

M. sinensis 'Purpurascens' Flame Grass
Of all miscanthus this one has the most reliable red-orange autumn foliage. Rosey spikes appear as early as July. It grows just fine in the shade but instead of the burning red foliage you will see a variety of pastel hues, not quite living up to its common name. Height 1.2-1.5m (4-5') (staking is unnecessary)

M. sinensis 'Silberfeder' Silver Feather Grass
An older European selection & still one of the best grass cultivars available today. Rich green foliage in a graceful, arching, vase shape. In August this grass becomes adorned with shimmering, silvery-white plumes. Height 1.5-1.8m (5-6') (mature plants require staking)

M. sinensis var. *strictus* Porcupine Grass A unique specimen plant with spiky, stiff, bright green foliage & horizontal, yellow banding similar to *M. sinensis* 'Zebrinus' but tighter, more upright & much hardier. Copper blooms appear in September rising 30-60cm (1-2') above the foliage. Height 1.5-1.8m (5-6') (staking is unnecessary)

M. sinensis 'Variegatus' Variegated Silver Grass A very bright & showy arching clump of distinct green & white striped leaves. Creamy-pink plumes appear in September as the foliage matures to an almond hue. Height 1.5-1.8m (5-6') (mature plants require staking)

FEEDING

Feeding of ornamental grasses are really very simple - don't! Well, actually that is a bit of an exaggeration, grasses actually prefer to be grown on the lean side. They will be sturdier without the addition of the high-powered nutrients. Use a slow release fertilizer such as GARDENWORKS flower and vegetable fertilizer 10-15-20. You may think that fertilizers such as are used on lawns would be appropriate for grasses however have you noticed how quickly the lawn grows after fertilizing? Tall-growing ornamental grasses will bolt for the sky and with such rapid growth will be unable to hold themselves up. This will result in weak, floppy plants.

The only exception to the rule is *Miscanthus*. It does better with some extra fertilizer and moisture. The solution to the potential flopping problem is to use organic fertilizers such as well-rotted manure such as GARDENWORKS mushroom manure or sea soil.

WATERING

Ornamental grasses need to be well watered their first year in order to get good root establishment. During the year the plant will need about 3-5cm of water per week to establish the root system. Once the root systems are established, the plants are better adapted to lower moisture levels. Mulch can be very useful the first year. However, do not mulch right to the crown of the plant. This can cause the crown to rot because of the constant moisture.

HOW DEEP TO PLANT

It is very important to plant your ornamental grasses so that the crown of the plant is level with the soil's surface. Some grasses, in particular *Pennisetum*, are very sensitive to being planted too deep. The crown rots and the plants die.

