



# Ornamental Grasses

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## Quick Facts...

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- Grasses are adaptable and can grow in poorer soils than many other Garden plants.
- Grasses require little effort to maintain.
- Grasses come in many heights, colors, textures and water requirements.
- Grass seed heads and foliage add fall and winter interest.
- Dried grasses have many decorative uses indoors and out.
- Grasses can be used as groundcovers, specimen plants, for erosion control, and as transitional elements.

Ornamental grasses include not only true grasses (Gramineae) but close relatives such as sedges (Cyperaceae), rushes (Juncaceae), hardy bamboos (particularly the genus *Phyllostachys*), and others. This fact sheet presents ornamental grasses adapted to the Rocky Mountain region. Listings are for USDA hardiness zones 5 and lower. Some popular, tender grasses grown as annuals also are listed.

Grasses are useful in different types of landscapes, including native, plains and meadow. They add variety to many types of Gardens, including water, Japanese, rock, wildlife, craft, xeriscape, container and others. Ornamental grasses add two elements to the Garden experience that are not readily obtained from many other plants: movement and sound.

Some grasses grow best under warm temperatures (warm season) and others in cooler temperatures (cool season). Plant ornamental grasses in the spring. Fall planting generally has proved marginally successful

Most grasses can benefit from mulching and many from cutting back, usually just before new growth begins in the spring. Use hedge shears and wear gloves to prevent cuts from the razor-sharp edges of some species.

A number of perennial grasses form root masses that may require a pruning or chain saw to divide and transplant. It generally is a fairly easy matter to grow annual types from seed.

Few pests bother grasses. If aphids or mites appear, spray with a strong stream of water to control the problem.



Figure 1: Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*).

## Xeriscape Grasses for Dry Conditions

**Indian grass** (*Sorghastrum nutans*). This grass is native to the North American prairies. The foliage varies in color and has a medium-fine texture. In late summer, tan-yellow seed heads form on stiff stems. The upright seed heads measure 2 to 3 inches wide and 6 to 10 inches long. Flowers are delicate looking and turn bronze as they mature. Cut flowers are good for fresh or dried arrangements. In the fall, foliage first turns yellow then orange. The plant reaches 3 to 5 feet high. The variety 'Holt' blooms early and develops good fall color. The foliage of 'Sioux Blue' is blue; 'Bluebird' is blue-gray.

This warm-season grass grows best in full sun to light shade. It prefers moderately moist conditions but will withstand drier soils. In its native tallgrass prairie habitat, it receives summer rains and grows in sandy, gravelly and even wet soils. It is hardy to USDA zone 4.

Use Indian grass in mass plantings, for naturalizing along highways, and on slopes for erosion control. It also provides a tall accent plant with fall and winter Garden interest. Heavy snows can bend the seed stalks.

**Little bluestem** (*Schizachyrium scoparium*, *Andropogon scoparius*). The outstanding features of this Great Plains grass are the fluffy, white seed plumes that rise well above the foliage, and the orange to russet-red fall color that often lasts well into winter. The foliage is medium textured and ranges from green to blue-green to blue. Clumps grow 2 to 3 feet tall.

Little bluestem is a warm-season grass that requires drier conditions and is drought tolerant. Grow in full sun on a variety of soils except wet or mucky ones. It is hardy to USDA zone 3.

This grass is useful when massed in transition areas, for erosion control, and as single specimens in borders. It is a good source for cut flowers. Named varieties are worth looking for but may be hard to locate. 'Cimmaron' has excellent blue foliage. Grow 'Blaze' for its intense fall color that varies from pink-orange to red-purple.

**Prairie dropseed** (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). This North American native grass grows 3 feet high. Its thin, fine-textured leaves are emerald green and grow in upright, arching hummocks. Leaves turn gold to orange-red in fall. The sweet-smelling, late-summer blooms are tannish brown and cloudlike. It is hardy to USDA zone 4.

Prairie dropseed is drought and heat resistant but benefits from some summer water. Grow it in full sun in many soil types, including rocky ones. This somewhat warm-season accent plant for hot, dry locations adds fragrance to the Garden. The seed attract birds and other wildlife. It is also useful as a tall groundcover.



Figure 2: Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*).



Figure 3: Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*).



Figure 4: Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Stricta').

## Grasses for Moderately Moist to Moist Gardens

**Feather reed grass** (*Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Stricta'). The wheat-like look of this grass makes it one of the showiest and most popular grasses. The foliage is medium green, stiff and 1/2 inch wide. It grows in an upright, arching clump that reaches 2 to 3 feet tall. Leaves turn orange to yellow in the fall. The straight, greenish flower spikes form in May to June, turn golden, then bleach buff and persist into the winter.

This is a partially cool-season grass for full sun. It tolerates heavy soils and grows in medium-dry to moist conditions. It is hardy to USDA zone 4.

Grow it as a single specimen plant for a vertical accent. It also can be grouped for a horizontal swath of golden flowers. Feather reed grass makes a good background plant where a handsome, stately look is desired. 'Overdam' is a variety with white variegated foliage and requires partial shade. In colder areas with a shorter growing season, Foerster's feather reed grass blooms earlier (*Calamagrostis arundinacea* 'Karl Foerster').

**Japanese blood grass** (*Imperata cylindrica* 'Red Baron' or var. *rubra*). This grass is noted for its red and green foliage and no blooms. It grows upright between 1/2 and 1 foot tall and forms spreading colonies. Use barriers or pots to contain it. Avoid heavy soil. Fall color is deep red to maroon. Its eye-catching appearance can be overused if not matched with appropriate landscape plants.

This warm-season grass requires moderately moist to moist conditions and winter water. It prefers midday shade; its appearance suffers in bright sun and heat. It is hardy to USDA zone 5 and should be considered tender.

**Moor grass** (*Molina caerulea*). This upright, arching plant with stiff flower stems reaches 7 feet tall. The foliage is 1/2 inch wide and light green with a yellow fall color. Flowers are brown, yellow or purple and fade to a tawny buff. Both flowers and leaves break off at the base, minimizing winter interest.

Moor grass is a warm-season grass that does best in moist soil and full sun but tolerates light shade. It does poorly in very alkaline soils. It is hardy to USDA zone 4.

Use moor grass as an accent plant in borders either singly or in masses. It makes good fresh or dried flowers. 'Heidebraut' is a compact variety that grows 4 feet tall. 'Moorhexe' is the same height with purplish flowers. 'Skyracer' grows tall, robust foliage and 'Windspiel' has tall, golden flowers.



Figure 5: Japanese blood grass  
(*Imperata cylindrica*).



Figure 6: Moor grass (*Molina caerulea*).

**Table 1: Ornamental grasses for dry conditions.**

Name	Hardiness zone and season	Height (ft.)	Comments
<i>Andropogon gerardii</i> Big bluestem	4 - warm	3 - 6	Blue green foliage in a stiff upright clump. Fall blooming. Three-branched seed heads resemble bird's feet. Orange fall color.
<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i> Side oats grama	4 - warm	1 - 2.5	Prairie grass noted for one-sided seed head arrangement. Gray-textured foliage in clumps. Heavy or sandy soil.
<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i> Blue grama	3 - warm	1	A clump-forming hardy native grass. Use in unirrigated areas and with wildflowers.
<i>Eragrostis trichodes</i> Sand love grass	5 - cool	1 - 2	Medium green foliage in small clumps. Pink flowers that turn golden on 3-foot stalks from mid- to late summer.
<i>Festuca cinerea</i> <i>F. ovina</i> or <i>F. glauca</i> Blue fescue	4 - cool	0.5 - 1.5	Small blue to bright green clumps with tan to gold-toned seed-heads. Partial shade. Many varieties. Evergreen in zone 5.
<i>Helictotrichon sempervirens</i> Blue oat grass	4 - cool	2.5	Dense blue pointed leaves in mostly upright tufted clumps. One-sided seed heads in June begin white then turn golden.
<i>Koeleria cristata</i> June grass	4 - cool	1	A small green clump grass with showy white flower panicles in June. A host for butterfly larvae. Shows wide soil tolerance.
<i>Oryzopsis hymenoides</i> Indian ricegrass	3 - cool	1.5 - 2	Narrow medium green leaves from tufted clumps. Airy flower panicles on wiry stems. Well-drained soil. Fresh and dried flowers.
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> Little bluestem	3 - warm	2 - 3	Green to blue-green to blue clumps. Fluffy white seed plumes. Orange to red fall color. Drought tolerant.
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i> Indian grass	4 - warm	3 - 5	Tallgrass prairie native. Foliage color varies turns yellow then orange in fall. Tan-yellow seed heads. Prefers moisture will withstand drier soils.
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i> Prairie dropseed	4 - warm	3	Thin fine-textured emerald leaves gold to orange-red in fall. Accent plant for hot dry locations. Seeds attract birds.

**Table 2: Ornamental grasses for moderately moist to moist Gardens.**

Name	Hardiness zone and season	Height (ft.)	Comments
<i>Arrhenatherum elatius bulbosum</i> 'Variegatum' Variegated bulbous oat grass	4 - cool	0.5 - 1	White-striped tufts of foliage. Oat-like flower spikes in May-June. Grow in partial shade and moist conditions.
<i>Calamagrostis acutiflora</i> 'Stricta' Feather reed grass	4 - cool	2 - 3	Showy, upright, arching clump. Medium green, stiff foliage. Orange to yellow fall color. Flower spikes persist into winter. Tolerates heavy soils.
<i>Carex grayi</i> Gray's or morning star sedge	4	2 - 2.5	Light green leaves in clumps. Noted for clusters of 1-inch fruits resembling spiked maces. Prefers moist conditions.
<i>Carex morrowii</i> Japanese sedge	5	1	Semi evergreen, arching clumps with bright green or variegated foliage. Provide constant moisture, light shade, well-drained soils.
<i>Carex muskingumensis</i> Palm sedge	4	2	Slowly spreading with palm-like foliage that yellows in full sun. Requires shade and moist conditions.
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i> Northern sea oats	5 - cool	2	Noted for its showy, drooping flowers and light green, upright, bamboo-like foliage. Flat green flowers start green, turn copper.
<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i> Lemon grass	Annual	2	Useful for citrus aroma and as a cooking herb. Grow in pots and bring indoors at first sign of frost.
<i>Deschampsia caespitosa</i> Tufted hair grass	4 - cool	3 - 4	Dark green, tufted foliage. Airy flower panicles change from green to yellow to near purple. Requires moisture and light shade.
<i>Elymus arenarius</i> 'Glaucus' Blue lyme grass	4 - cool	2 - 3	Blue foliage in mounded clumps turns yellow in fall. Quite invasive in loose soils. Seed heads not notable.
<i>Erianthus ravennae</i> Ravenna or plume grass	5 - warm	4	Fluffy, cream-colored flowers on 8-foot stalks in August. Northern substitute for tender pampas grass, <i>Cortaderia selloana</i> .
<i>Holcus lanatus</i> Velvet grass	5 - cool	1	Soft, gray-green foliage with white flower panicles in midsummer. Provide moisture, partial shade and well-drained soil.
<i>Imperata cylindrica rubra</i> Japanese blood grass	5 - warm	.5 - 1	Eye-catching red and green foliage. Deep red to maroon in fall. Midday shade, moist conditions. Upright, spreading.
<i>Miscanthus floridulus</i> , <i>M. giganteus</i> Giant Chinese silvergrass	4 - warm	8	Giant arching form with 10 inch, fluffy silver flowers. Does not bloom every year in Colorado.

<b>Table 2: Ornamental grasses for moderately moist to moist Gardens. (cont.)</b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Hardiness zone and season</b>	<b>Height (ft.)</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<i>Miscanthus oligostachys</i> Small Japanese silvergrass	4 - warm	3 - 4	Short, wide leaves have a bamboo look. Early flowers, arching form. More useful than maiden grass in small scale landscapes.
<i>Miscanthus sacchariflorus</i> Silver banner grass	3	6	Large grass useful in colder climates. Less desirable than giant Chinese silvergrass in warmer zones.
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> Maiden or silvergrass	4b-5 - warm	5 - 6	Widely used grass for variable leaf color, arching form and whisk-like flowers. Many varieties available.
<i>Molina caerulea</i> Moor grass	4 - warm	7	Light green, arching foliage. Yellow in fall. Brown, yellow or purple flowers fade to buff. Moist soil, full sun. Accent plant.
<i>Panicum virgatum</i> Switchgrass	4b - warm	5	Stiff, upright clumps with showy, airy flowers of pink, red or silver in midsummer. Tolerates soil extremes. Good cut flower.
<i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i> Fountain grass	5 - warm	3	Bright green foliage, bottlebrush flowers. Some varieties freeze out in coldest winters. Try 'Hameln,' 'Little Bunny,' 'Moudry.'
<i>Pennisetum setaceum</i> 'Rubrum' Tender fountain grass	Annual	2 - 3	The red variety of this annual grass is widely sold for use in containers and annual flower beds.
<i>Pennisetum villosum</i> Feather top	Annual	2	Silky, rabbit tail-like flowers emerge green turn creamy white. Bright green leaves.
<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i> 'Feeseys Form' Ribbon grass	4 - warm	2 - 3	Pink-white leaves with green stripes. Enclose to keep it from spreading. Blooms decorative, requires moisture.
<i>Rychelytrum neriglume</i> Ruby grass	Annual	1 - 2	Blue-green foliage with ruby pink blooms in early summer that eventually turn white. Good for fresh and dried arrangements.
<i>Sesleria autumnalis</i> Autumn moorgrass	4b-5 - cool	1.5	Olive green foliage in tufted mounds. Narrow, purplish flower spikes persists through winter.

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