

# Way to Grow

Grasses - a Natural Choice for Your Landscape

by Steve & Cathy Lambert



Grasses have always been part of nature's own landscape, covering more than 20 percent of the earth's land mass. All grasses and grass-like plants are monocots. Most are from the family *poacea*, but also include flax (*liliacea*), carex, sedges (*Cyperaceae*) and rushes (*Juncaceae*). Because of their durability and versatility, ornamental grasses are being used more frequently in garden design.

Ornamental grasses can be used as specimen plants, border or background plants, smaller varieties can be used as ground covers while larger ones can be used as a planting screen. Their adaptability and beauty make grasses a great companion to flowering plants and woody ornamentals, not to mention their use as vertical fillers in flower arranging.

Ornamental grasses are available in a wide array of shapes, colors, textures, and sizes. Each grass species has its own unique form including compact mounds, tall spikes, or dense spreading mats. Grass foliage colors vary from shades of green, yellow, cream, blue, purple, and red as well as many variegated varieties, which combine several of these hues. While some grasses are deciduous and go dormant in the winter, they still offer a spectacular display of fall colors that can provide great early winter interest to your garden.

Grass flowers, also called inflorescences, and subsequent seed heads are equally diverse in color ranging from the rather ho-hum forest grass to truly spectacular pampas grasses which can be found in different shades of maroon, pink, silver, or beige. These inflorescences have the added benefit of drying well for indoor decorative uses.

With ornamental grasses, looks aren't everything. They add texture and an element of dimension to your garden which designers refer to as a "vertical accent." In addition, grasses provide pleasing wave like movement and soothing sounds to create a peaceful atmosphere in your garden.

Vertical accents are especially important when designing container gardens. Grasses

or flax can be used as the main focal point of your pot or as a dramatic backdrop to contrasting plants. In our own yard, we've included a grass in almost every pot.

Once established, ornamental grasses require very little care. Sadly, this is not always viewed as a universal fact among yard maintenance companies. Maintenance workers are often trained to over prune grasses as if they were a manicured hedge. This results in a bad or flat top haircut appearance instead of their natural graceful, fountain shape. Grasses do best when left alone with an occasional thinning of dead blades and annual pruning. Deciduous grasses, which die back completely in winter, will be rejuvenated by cutting the entire plant back to within three or four inches from the ground. Take this harsh pruning approach in late winter when the grass starts to look ratty. Just be certain you don't wait too long. This must be done

before early spring when the new growth starts or you risk cutting off the hidden tips of all that new growth.

Evergreen varieties also need to be cut back or cleaned up usually after the flowers start to fall apart. Recently, we saw the flowers cut off of a Japanese silver grass just as they were starting to bloom. This not only robs the grass of its glory day, but can also stunt its growth.

It's important when designing with grasses to pay close attention to their height and width potential. We frequently see designs and gardens where grasses are planned or planted too close, creating a jungle like appearance. We are constantly reminding people not to over plant a new garden. The whole garden should be looked at as a living, growing space. If you must have that instant full look, keep in mind that grasses can be divided and moved around as your garden matures.

The following is a list of our favorite grasses: *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' Variegated Japanese Forest grass. This grass is at the top of our "favorites" list and finds its way into about 90 percent of the gardens we create. Boasting a bright golden foliage, it's leaves are variegated with green stripes near the margins. Find a sunny or partially shady spot for this grass as too much shade causes the golden



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**Terra Cotta Yarrow and Deer Grass** makes a nice addition to any landscape design.

strands to fade to a lime green. While this grass is a slow grower, often not reaching its mature size of one foot tall by three feet wide for three years, its durability and show stopping texture will reward the patient gardener for years to come. Most garden guides recommend this grass be grown in shade however, in Orinda we find that it grows poorly in deep or heavy shade and thrives in light shade. In our own yard this grass does great in full sun. Use it to line pathways and water features as well as in container gardens.

*Molinia caerulea* 'Variegata' Variegated Moor Grass. This tufted, compact, perennial has dense clumps of slender, foot-long, green leaves marked with stripes of creamy yellow. In the summer, slim, pale-yellow flower stalks rise up to two feet tall arching above the blades. Each inflorescence holds well into the fall, turning a toasty tan. We use this grass often as a focal point in containers, or atop a hillcrest, where the rising or setting sun can up-light its brilliant green and yellow strands. This grass is stunning when planted in mass.

*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' Japanese Silver Grass. This striking grass has an "inner light" that emanates from the white midribs of its finely-textured leaf blades each highlighted by threads of white around their edges. Its graceful shape usually matures to between five and six feet tall so give this plant plenty of space and be prepared to divide it after about five years. 'Morning Light' turns golden in November then fades to a winter beige and it's flowers can be cut and dried to enjoy indoors too. This grass makes a bold statement as a singular specimen and is a standout in small group plantings. For a cool color combo, group "Morning Light" with lavenders, and sages.

*Helictotrichon sempervirens* 'Sapphire Fountain.' The best Blue Oat Grass, in our opinion, with graceful fountains of steel-blue blades which form neat ornamental clumps that combine well when planted with other grasses. This grass is reliable and attractive as an accent or combination plant and is perfect for adding vertical interest around rock gardens or dry creek beds. For a stunning combination, plant 'Sapphire Fountain' next to purple leaved plants such as Japanese Barberry.

*Festuca glauca* 'Rainbow Blue Festuca' grass. This small, five to seven inch tall grass, is the bluest we've found to date, with the added bonus of ever changing seasonal color including red and tan blades at differ-

ent times of year, hence the name, 'Rainbow' grass. It makes a great "cover" plant for banks and hillsides as it provides excellent erosion control. As an added bonus, the flowers it produces will attract "skipper" butterflies to your garden. In addition to hillside planting we frequently use this variety in rock gardens, pots and borders.

*Carex tunicula* 'Berkeley Sedge.' This is not an actual grass but a bright green grass-like sedge that retains its good looks year-round. This sedge matures at about two feet wide and two feet tall. It does well in either full sun or light shade with occasional water. It's easy to grow and is a good companion plant for blue-eyed grasses, and other small flowering perennials. This hearty sedge does well under oaks and other trees, and can take a fair amount of neglect and abuse as long as it's cut back a couple of times a year after each bloom.

*Muhlenbergia rigens* 'Deer Grass.' A long-time resident of California and other southwestern states, this semi-evergreen grass is upright, thin and has arrow like silvery inflorescences reaching beyond its narrow, 18-inch high, gray-green foliage. Creating a shimmery veil in the landscape and adding angular pizzazz to dried arrangements, its reflective flowering stalks bend gracefully as they age. This is another grass to plant where it will bask in the glow of the setting sun. Deer Grass is a florist's favorite for arrangements too.

*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Fireworks' Tricolor Fountain Grass. This is the latest of the hybrid purple leaf fountain grasses. Firework's dazzling, maroon foliage has stripes of white, green and pink that change throughout the seasons. It makes a nice medium height border plant at 18 to 30-inches, as well as a great rock garden accent, or container plant. It's clump forming and drought tolerant which when combined with the array of season changing color makes this grass a great pick for any garden. For an eye-catching duo, plant Fireworks with *Tutti Fruitti Agastache* 'Licorice Mint.' Although not all of the grasses we've listed are native, most are drought tolerant, deer resistant and have a proven track record of thriving in our Orinda micro climate.

*If you have specific question about some of the varieties of grasses in this article or one we didn't include, please email us at [office@gardenlightslandscape.com](mailto:office@gardenlightslandscape.com).*