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The Beauty of Ornamental Grasses

The use of ornamental grasses has been on the rise over the past few years – and with good reason, as ornamental grasses have a lot to offer gardeners.

Grasses generally have strong linear forms that can be used to contrast with mounding perennials with rounded blooms such as Blanketflower (*Gaillardia* sp.) or Geranium (*Geranium* sp.) or to accent tall, spiky perennials such as Sage (*Salvia* sp.) or Veronica (*Veronica* sp.).

The long, soft blades and inflorescences (flowering part of the grass) tempt us to reach out and run our fingers through them – inviting us to experience our garden both visually and tactilely.



Grasses bring motion to our landscape as they wave and bend in the slightest breeze.

Many grasses also offer fall and winter interest as they turn shades of tan, rust or red. Let them stand throughout winter when perennials have retreated below ground and they will provide cover for over-wintering birds.

Grasses are the perfect low-maintenance plant. Many tolerate poor soil, and drought, and require just a once-a-year cutting.

Choosing grasses is similar to selecting perennials. A gardener should be familiar with bloom time and general habit in order to choose the right grass for the right spot.

Grasses are either cool season or warm season growers. Cool season grasses grow and flower in the cooler months of spring. If not irrigated they will go dormant during the warm summer but with some supplemental irrigation they remain green through summer.

Warm season grasses wait for consistently warm days and warm soil to begin their growth. Then in the hot days of summer, when other plants are struggling, they suddenly shoot up and flower.

Well-behaved clump formers are the best grasses to use in mixed beds as they will stay in their place and not invade your other plantings.

Let's take a look at few grasses:



Festuca cinerea 'Elijah Blue' is a cool season grass with icy-blue blades and buff-colored inflorescences. It forms a neat, dense mound 12" high and wide. It is well-suited for edging a border or mixing among low-growing perennials.

Bouteloua gracilis, Blue Grama Grass, is a warm season clumping grass native to short grass prairies. Its blue-green blades form a low mound from which the distinctive curved seed heads appear. This is a mid-

size grass at 2' x 2' tall and wide.

Schizachyrium scoparium, Little Bluestem, is another warm season clumping grass native to short grass prairies. In the heat of summer it shoots up its 2-3' blue-green blades that turn rusty red in the fall. A mass planting of Little Bluestem is quite dramatic in the fall. Little Bluestem requires minimal irrigation during the hottest months.

Miscanthus sinensis 'Yakushima' is a dwarf maiden grass with stiff green blades reaching to 3 – 4'. The blades are topped by showy silvery flower heads in late summer. In fall this grass turns a golden bronze.

Panicum virgatum 'Prairie Sky' is a cultivar of a native prairie grass. It forms 4 – 5' tall clumps of blue-gray foliage topped with pinkish flower heads in late summer. This grass will tolerate drought but could use some supplemental water during the hottest months.

Muhlenbergia rigens, Deer Grass, is a Southwest native that grows at elevations up to 7000'. It forms a dense mound of 4 – 5' blue-gray foliage and sends up tan-colored inflorescences. This tough grass will tolerate drought and reflected heat.

Muhlenbergia capillaris 'Regal Mist' has become very popular in the Southwest over the past few years. The deep pink flowers form a "haze" over the 3' mound of foliage in late summer and fall. This grass is stunning in mass plantings. Like Deer Grass it will tolerate drought and heat.

