

The Beauty and Uses of Native Grass

In this time of drought and careful use of water, there has been an increased interest in native Southwestern grasses. Most are drought tolerant once established. Each variety has its own special flower and seed stalk which adds beauty and gracefulness to the garden. They can be used as accents for mounds, beds, borders or in mass plantings.

We hope the following information will help you decide to use some of these natives in your landscape.

SIDEOATS GRAMA *Bouteloua curtipendula* is a great grass to create a meadow effect. The short-grass prairies of North America are dominated by two species; Sideoats grama and Blue grama. Both of these warm-season, clumping grasses are extremely cold hardy and durable. They do best in full sun. In late spring and summer masses of unusual and distinctive flower spikes and seed heads are produced. As winter approaches, these plants go dormant. The seeds are used by wildlife. Sideoats grama forms a clump to 2 feet tall by 12-15 inches in diameter, with a two foot tall flower spike rising above the plant in spring, summer and fall. After blooming, large seeds form on one side of the stiff stalk, giving it its name. A good hard pruning in early spring to remove dormant winter foliage and spent flower spikes will keep this grass looking great.

BLUE GRAMA *Bouteloua gracilis* is similar in appearance and uses to Sideoats grama, it is easily identified by its distinctive curved, airy seed heads which appear in the summer. The seed heads give a light, airy feel to meadow gardens.

REGAL MIST DEER GRASS *Muhlenbergia capillaries* has taken the Southwest by storm in the past few years. During the fall bloom period, masses of this grass can stop traffic. The haze of deep pink flowers covering the plant is especially stunning when backlit by the sun. It adapts to a wide range of soil and does best with ample irrigation to keep it looking its best in the summertime. Use Regal Mist in bold sweeps, nestled up against boulders or low walls for a softening effect or around water features. It needs to be cut back hard in late winter or early spring.

DEER GRASS *Muhlenbergia rigens* is dependable and adaptable. Deer grass is the backbone of many desert gardens. The lush green-gray foliage softens boulders, cacti and is ideal for use around water features. Native to the Southwest at elevations up to 7000 feet, Deer grass thrives in varied conditions. It likes full sun and difficult reflected heat exposures, and tolerates a bit of shade. It is extremely drought tolerant, but the foliage browns out if it does not receive adequate water in the summer. In fall, it sends up slender tan flower spikes that create a stunning contrast with the four to five foot mound of luxurious foliage. Drip irrigation is recommended.

MEXICAN FEATHER GRASS *Nasella tenuissima* is a delightful fine-textured grass, soft and inviting, Light breezes turn this billowy grass into living sculpture. It grows to 2 feet tall and wide and is spectacular in mass plantings. Tuck it among boulders and accent plants. Fast growing, fairly short lived, but naturalizes in the landscape. Water this grass with a drip irrigation system. Plant in full sun. Cut back in early spring to remove dormant foliage and dried seed heads.