

Ornamental Grasses Add Texture to the Garden

Ornamental grasses have become a must-have in Midwest gardens. They can be used as accent plants among other perennials, groundcovers on sloping terrain, or edging along pathways. They add fine texture, statuesque form, and attractive flowers and seed heads. There are several outstanding grasses ready to add multi-season beauty to your garden.

Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) is a native from the prairie. Its seeds were used by Native Americans as a food source. This grass forms upright arching, 18 to 24-inch clumps of fine textured foliage. In fall, its foliage blazes golden-yellow. Prairie dropseed prefers a sunny spot and is just as beautiful as a specimen plant as it is when used as a mass of groundcover.

Switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*) is a native from the tall grass prairie. Clumps of blue-green foliage reach an impressive 4 to 5 feet. Pink-tinted flowers rise above the foliage in July. In fall, the foliage turns yellow; and sturdy stems stand up to snow in winter. Switch grass tolerates many soil types, including clay, and can withstand dry or moist soil. I love Dallas Blues – a variety with wide baby blue leaf blades that grows up to 8 feet tall. Another favorite is North Wind – a rigidly upright variety with deep green foliage that grows 6 feet tall.

Karl Foerster feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis acutiflora*) is not native to the Midwest, but grows exceptionally well here. Wheat-like flowers begin in June and continue through summer well above the 18 to 36-inch arching mound of foliage. Overdam is a white variegated form that stays a bit smaller. Plant feather reed grass in full sun and rich, moist soil for best results, although it will tolerate a bit of shade.

Tufted hairgrass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*) is another tidy grass, 1 to 2-feet tall, that features masses of airy flowers 2 to 3 feet above the foliage in May. The silky green flowers persist through most of the summer maturing to golden yellow. The dark green foliage is semi-evergreen. Tufted hairgrass does best in full sun to light shade.

Maiden grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*) is not native but is often chosen for our gardens because of its graceful form. There are varieties that stay small – barely reaching 3 feet – and others that grow as tall as 7 feet. Gracillimus is often chosen for formal plantings. Strictus has unusual leaves with horizontal bands of golden yellow. Plant maiden grasses in lots of sun and moist, well-drained soil.

The statuesque giant silver grass (*Miscanthus floridus*) reaches 7 to 10 feet tall. Layers of robust, bamboo-like leaves grow so quickly once the temperatures warm, I swear you can see it grow. Flowers arrive later than other grasses and stand a foot above the towering foliage. Plant this giant as an accent place, in place of a shrub, or as screening.

Northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) also features bamboo-like foliage but only grows about 3 feet tall. Unique, flat, oat-shaped seed heads appear in July turning from green to rusty-brown. This grass performs handsomely in part shade and prefers rich, moist but well-drained soil.

There are so many types of ornamental grasses available in different heights, colors and textures. Consider adding a few new varieties to your landscape this year.

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