



Some Ornamental Grasses can Perform in a Shady Garden

Combining many shades of green results in lovely contrasts of form and texture. This is the elusive quality that brings beauty and serenity to a shade garden – the place of retreat during the hottest part of the day.

Prized for their elegant stature and movement with summer breezes, ornamental grasses are often disregarded when planning a shade garden as they are often thought to thrive only in full sun. With careful selection, there are grasses available that can be used effectively in a shady landscape.

First, evaluate the patterns of light and note the time of day that shade occurs. Keep in mind that trees can be thinned to allow more light into the garden.

The sun is hottest in the afternoon. A garden that receives two or three hours of afternoon sun is able to support plants that are thought to grow only in full sun.

Consider also the levels of light present. Heavy shade created by the large leaves and dense growth of a Norway maple differs dramatically from the dappled shade produced by the small leaves and open branching of a honey locust. The dappled or bright shade under a mature, high-branched tree is often ideal for many plants.

Sunlight is necessary for flower production, and plants in the shade will bloom less vigorously so resist choosing grasses that are distinguished by their flowering. Shady conditions also often encourage lax growth. You may have to stake a plant to keep it looking its best. As a result, think twice before choosing a grass that is described as ‘fountain-like’.

Japanese silver grasses are some of the most elegant grasses. Consider these for the brighter areas of the shade garden. They form rigidly upright clumps with leaf blades that gracefully arch outward which is beautiful all season. In winter, they are striking silhouettes. They perform quite well in dappled shade but are not likely to flower.



Morning Light has fine-textured leaf blades with a thin white margin. Purpurascens has medium-textured foliage that turns reddish in late summer and purple-red in fall. Variegatus has striking white variegated leaf blades.

Cool season grasses like tufted hair grass and hakone grass are grateful for a respite from the summer sun. Tufted hair grass forms a neat tuft of dark green foliage; hakone grass grows slowly to an arching mound of bamboo-like foliage.

Moor grass is a stunning accent for the shade garden. Airy purple flowers rise about the foliage in summer and mature to a golden haze in fall. Moor grass is a bit slow to establish but is worth the wait.



Northern sea oats can tolerate a full day of dappled shade and still flower satisfactorily. It has upright bamboo-like leaves and boasts drooping panicles of flattened green 'oats' that mature to copper.

Consider carefully the characteristics of the plant versus the site you have in mind. Use the list below to help you choose the best grass for your shady garden.

Dappled shade:

Japanese silver grass (Miscanthus)
Fountain grass (Pennisetum)
Moor grass (Molinia and Sesleria)
Tufted hair grass (Deschampsia)
Feather reed grass (Calamagrostis)

Cool moist shade:

Hakone grass (Hakonechloa)
Tufted hair grass (Deschampsia)
Moor grass (Molinia)

Dry shade:

Feather reed grass (Calamagrostis)
Japanese silver grass (Miscanthus)
Fountain grass (Pennisetum)
Northern sea oats (Chasmanthium)

Full or deep shade:

Northern sea otas (Chasmanthium)
Sedge (Carex)