



GARDEN NOTES

GRASSES YOU DON'T HAVE TO MOW

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Fall brings out the best in some plants. One group of plants that start to look their best now and add interest to the landscape are ornamental grasses.

These perennial plants are some of the showiest in the autumn and early winter, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. They come in many colors, heights, shapes and sizes, and can be used as borders, hedges, backdrops, in groupings or as a focal point.

Normally, ornamental grasses are planted as a part of a perennial garden, or in an area in combination with shrubs, flowers and other plants, he explains. Because they are more spectacular later in the year, ornamental grasses need to be surrounded by other plants that look good in the spring and summer.

“Along with their beauty in the fall landscape, there are other reasons to use ornamental grasses,” he says. “For the most part, they require little care, and are not bothered by many diseases or insects. Ornamental grasses are long-lived, drought tolerant and can adapt to different soil types. To maintain them, divide them after a few years to keep them a manageable size, and trim those that need it in the spring.”

Before purchasing ornamental grasses, decide which characteristics you find most attractive, Goodspeed suggests. Consider how tall, how wide and what colors you want. You can also go to a nursery to see what is available, what appeals to you and what will fit into your landscape plan.

There are literally hundreds of different ornamental grasses, he says. A few are annuals, but most are perennials. With so many to choose from, it is often hard to decide which is best.

Some of the more recognized ornamental grasses stand tall and make a nice background or screen planting. The most familiar, Northern pampas (*Erianthus ravennae*), is different from true pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) which is not winter hardy for our area. The grass blades reach four to five feet high and the seed plumes can tower more than 10 feet. These silvery colored seed heads are a little courser than true pampas, but are still quite attractive.

Many other grasses grow between four and six feet tall, Goodspeed says. Graziella Japanese silver grass (*Miscanthus sinensis Graziella*) has beautiful green and white foliage, and large, creamy-white seed heads. Other grasses about this height are the Japanese silver grass (*M. s. 'Variegatus'*) which has white variegation running the length of the grass blades, and zebra grass (*M. s. Zebrinus*), with banded variegation across the width of the grass blade.

“One of my favorite grasses that is only about 3 to 4 feet tall is called Little Blue Stem (*Andropogon scoparius*),” he says. “It transforms into a wonderful fountain of red, purple and brown colors in the fall. It is very upright, and as the name implies, has a somewhat blue tint in the summer. Another ornamental grass that is similar in height is the Morning Light Japanese silver grass (*M. s. Morning Light*). The blades are green with white margins and it has a very upright form.”

There are also many smaller grasses that get no more than 1 to 2 feet tall, he adds. National Arboretum fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides National Arboretum*) has an artistic form produced by small seed head plumes that remind me of a bottle brush. Many of the blue fescues create textural interest in the landscape with their smaller, wonderful blue colored grass. Use them in a group or as a border.

One problem with a few of the grasses is their aggressive behavior, Goodspeed says. Some that grow as a clump, stay put for the most part and can be easily divided or cut back. Others spread by rhizomes (underground stems) and become somewhat invasive. There are also ornamental grasses that propagate by seed and throw them all over in the flower beds, eventually outnumbering even weeds that may have been there. So, do some research and find out a little bit about grasses before planting them in the landscape.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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