

Ode to Ornamental Grasses (published 2025-05-17)
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Ornamental grasses deserve a love poem. Once you start looking into all the varieties of color, shape, height and benefits to nature, I think you'll also be a big fan. Add ornamental grasses to your flower beds to add 3-season interest. They are so easy to care for, have very few pest or disease issues, and are long-lived. You'll wonder why you never used them before.

First and foremost, opt for native grasses. Native grasses support garden ecosystems and native wildlife and many flower in their own special way to add unique touch to the garden.

There are cool-season and warm-season grasses as well as clumping/bunching and spreading grasses. Clumping grasses are well-behaved, staying where you plant them. Spreading grasses sneak out of their designated space by rhizomes and some can be a bother if they spread too assertively. There are some spreading grasses that are slowpokes. They are easier to keep in check. Be sure to check out the details before buying. Resources at the end of the article have information that can be helpful.

Cool-season grasses emerge when the low temperature is about 40 F, and grow best at temperatures of 60-80 F. They tend to be easy to grow and flower in early summer then growth stops. Their flowers are unique, having no petals or nectar but provide an interesting texture and color to the garden. The movement and rustling sound of the grasses in the wind are an added attraction in the garden. Cool-season grasses blend beautifully with flowers and shrubs in the garden and maintain their form and color throughout the summer. In fall, many turn a golden color that creates fall and winter interest.

There is good variety in the types of cool-season grasses. Foliage can be upright or arching, shiny or matte, dark green, blue-green, bright green, light green, spruce colored or slate colored. Foliage can grow in dense tufts or hang loosely, and can be very wispy fine, threadlike, or flat and soft. The flowers also vary greatly. They can grow at the ends or along the stalks. They can be closely or widely spaced or resemble a bottle brush. Some look feathery, while others can look like oats. Depending on the grass you choose, you can have white, yellow, light green, silver, purple or creamy silvery-yellow flowers.

A few varieties to consider are Gold dew tufted hairgrass (*Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau'), Wavy or crinkled hairgrass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*), American beak grain (*Diarrhena americana*), and Eastern bottlebrush (*Elymus hystrix*). Hairgrasses are bunching grasses and bottlebrush self-seeds but does not spread aggressively.

With all those choices, it's difficult to pick just one. So, let's make choosing more complicated by talking about warm-season ornamental grasses.

Warm-season grasses are most active when the minimum daily temperature is approximately 60 F and soil temperatures reach 55 F. The optimum growing conditions are temperatures of 85 – 95 F. They tend to take longer to establish than cool-season grasses, but patience pays off after they are established.

Species of warm-season native ornamental grasses that are recommended include Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Broomsedge bluestem (*Andropogon virginicus*), Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), Eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*) and Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). Switchgrass spreads slowly by rhizomes, the others are clumping grasses.

The tall grasses make a perfect background for flowers and shrubs. The shorter ones look great sprinkled throughout the garden. They all provide wonderful textural contrast and movement in the garden. In the fall and winter, the golden color of the dried grasses adds warmth to the landscape. These grasses also make striking additions to flower arrangements. I love my ornamental grasses. They make summer, fall and winter so much more enjoyable. I hope you'll try some in your gardens.

Resources

“Cool Season, Native Ornamental Grasses for the Home Garden,”
<https://extension.psu.edu/cool-season-native-ornamental-grasses-for-the-home-garden>

“Native Warm-Season Grasses,” <https://utbeef.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2020/11/PB1752.pdf>

“Comparing Warm-Season and Cool-Season Grasses for Erosion Control, Water Quality, and Wildlife Habitat,”
https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/Public/VA/NWSG_CSG_comparison.pdf

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT's YouTube site for helpful videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County's YouTube site:
<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.