



Many homeowners love the look of turf grass. Unfortunately, turfgrass is a major water consumer, when compared to many ornamental grass species. The term “ornamental grass” used to include not only true grasses (Gramineae), but close relatives such as sedges (Cyperaceae), rushes (Juncaceae), hardy bamboos (particularly the genus *Phyllostachys*) and others.

Ornamental grasses can add interest and movement to any landscape. They come in a wide range of sizes and colors, adding variety to many types of gardens throughout the year. Seasonally, they provide interest with their foliage and blooms. During the winter months, seed heads remain on the plant providing food and cover for birds. Another plus is that ornamental grasses require very little maintenance. Once established, they rarely need to be watered, never need fertilizing and are very disease and pest resistant.

Maintenance

Ornamental grass requires minimum effort to maintain. Yearly maintenance consists of pruning them during dormancy to promote new healthy growth in the spring. This mimics grazing or the effects of wildfire, both “pruning” events that they may encounter in their natural habitat. Timing of grass pruning depends on the species. Warm season grass (Mexican Feather grass is the only cool season species) should be pruned as close to the ground as possible in the spring before summer growth



Ornamental grasses add two elements to the garden experience: movement and sound.

begins. Typically that translates to sometime between the end of February and the beginning of April. Use hedge shears and wear gloves to prevent cuts from the razor-sharp edges of the leaf blades. Ornamental grass may need to be divided if they grow too big or have die-back in the center of the clump. This is best done while the grass is actively growing, but before it begins to produce seed heads. Use a spade to cut the clump into smaller sections. Each of these sections can be replanted. Few pests bother these grasses. If you notice aphids or spider mites, simply spray the clump with a strong stream of water to control the problem.

If you like the idea and look of ornamental grasses for your landscape, here are several species that will provide a significant vertical presence to any landscape situation. Make sure to check the approved plant list for your community to make sure that the species you have chosen is acceptable.



Photo courtesy of Parker County (Texas) Master Gardener Association





Deergrass (Muhlenbergia rigens) is a native to much of central Arizona. It grows naturally on banks of seasonal creeks and perennial streams. These plants get large and grow fast. They will normally

grow to mature size in a season or two. Give them full sun and enough water to equal 15"/yr after the first month of regular water.



Pink Muhly (Muhlenbergia capillaries) is a small clump grass with narrow glossy leaves that is native to Texas. Mounds with pink airy plumes grow to

be three feet tall and three feet across. Plant in full sun, reflected heat, or partial shade. It needs moderate irrigation in the summer to maintain a lush appearance.



Japanese Blood Grass (Imperata cylindrical) is a species native to Japan. It has a strong upright growth habit with open 12-18" length "red" colored leaf blades. Space it 12-18 inches apart in your garde and allow for full sun to light shade for best results.

Blue Grama (Bouteloua gracilis) is a moderate water using, fast growing grass that is native to North America. Bunches grow to be about one and a half feet tall. Plant in full sun or partial shade. The unique seed heads resemble eyelashes and are good for meadows.



Bush Muhly (Muhlenbergia Rigida) is a small, low-growing, clump forming grass with narrow green blades growing to about 2 feet tall and wide. Also known as Nashville or Metcal Muhly, it has fine-textured light green foliage that becomes dormant in the winter, In the late fall it turns to a beautiful purple-tan that dries to a wheat color.

