

Create Something Beautiful With Ornamental Grasses

by Steve Love, University of Idaho, Aberdeen

Very few plants can match the impact of a large grass plant in the landscape. The unique lines, created by the strong linear vertical or flaring texture and form are nearly impossible to duplicate with any other type of plant. They create any number of valuable effects in the landscape. They can mask the strong vertical lines of buildings or fences. They add unusual accent to almost any type of mass planting. They create sound and movement. They can create combinations of texture and scale that are difficult to duplicate, especially when in flower. They can be important contributors to color and color combinations in the landscape. Lastly, some of the large, sturdy grasses can provide points of interest in the drab landscapes of winter.

Most of us are familiar with a number of commonly sold ornamental grasses. By far and away the most commonly used grasses are the feather reed grasses (e.g. Karl Foerster) and the blue fescues (e.g. Elijah Blue). These are outstandingly beautiful and utilitarian grasses, but they represent only a miniscule fraction of what is available. Here are some suggestions for grasses you might want to investigate for your landscape.



Japanese Maiden Grass variety 'Malepartus'

Large Grasses (4 to 10 feet tall):

Japanese Maiden Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*) – tall grasses that grow relatively slow during the spring but reach their full glory in late summer. Many varieties produce exquisite feather plumes that remain intact all winter. Most varieties will grow in



Ornamental grass trials in Aberdeen

the warm climates around Boise. In the colder parts of the state, only the hardiest varieties should be planted. Some of these are 'Morning Lights', 'Adagio', 'Gracillimus', 'Malepartus', and 'Kaskade'.



Miscanthus Grass from Hollyberry Nursery

Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) – This interesting grass has short leaf blades but the flower stalks emerge and grow high above the basal mat. The impact is strikingly vertical and the flower panicles are a unique dark tan or brown color.

Giant Sacaton (*Sporobolus wrightii*) – This is one of the few large grasses that is drought tolerant. It can be used in water-conserving landscapes, but works just as well in a typical garden. It produces glistening, airy flower stalks late in the summer.

Medium-size Grasses (2 to 4 feet tall):

Love Grass (*Eragrostis trichoides*) – This grass looks a little like one of the nicer varieties of switchgrass but the plant is shorter and more compact, the flower stalks more dense, and the flowers are red.

Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) – Like a blue fescue on steroids. The steel blue leaves of this grass are set off by tan seed heads.

Small Grasses (Less than 2 foot tall):

Sedges (*Carex* species) – These grass-like plants come in many forms. Some are more than a foot tall, others work hard to get to 6 inches. Leaf texture varies from narrow-linear to vertical-linear. Leaf color varies from various shades of green to blue to bronze. A sedge variety can be found to create interest under almost any garden conditions.

This is just a sampling of the grasses you can find to beautify your world. Take the time to investigate the world of ornamental grasses. It will time well spent.

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Sunrise with Japanese Maiden Grass 'Kaskade'

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