

# Ornamental Grasses



by

Jean Marsh

Garden Design

design and consultation

especially for the homeowner

951-736-8941

# Ornamental Grasses

## *Introduction:*

A plant that makes the softest rustling sound while it dances and moves with the breeze. A plant that requires little water or care, grows rapidly, and produces flowers that reflect and capture light. Is there such a thing? The answer is yes. Ornamental Grasses.

From a garden esthetic they provide color, contrast, texture, the afore-mentioned rustling songs, movement with the slightest breeze and dramatic flowers. They dance with light, and provide fall color and form. From a practical standpoint, these plants are versatile, generally free of pests and disease, and once established do not require much in the way of water, maintenance or fertilizer. How could you resist?

It is my hope that I may introduce you to some of these grasses and give you some tips and tricks as to how you may have success with them in your gardens.

## *History:*

Just a quick little bit about this group of plants we call grasses. Although the use of ornamental grasses in the American Landscape may be considered new, actually they are as old as gardening itself. First among the cultivated agricultural crops, grasses belong to the family Gramineae (gra-min'-ee-ee), yielding the worlds cereal crops, as well all its forage grasses. Let me amend that: *most* of what we will generally refer to in this workshop are in the Grass family, but there are others that while we will *call* them grasses, really belong to the Rush or Sedge plant groups... more on that in the next section.

Grasses grow all over the world but it is only in recent history that garden cultivars have been introduced. No matter what the site requires there is a grass that will be suitable.

The North American continent was once one of the worlds greatest grass lands; the Prairies of the Midwest. California has its own history of native grasses. A natural companion to the Oak Woodlands of our foothills.

The majority of these important and beautiful eco-systems have gone the way of development or what we call tend to call progress. Most were either plowed under, over-grazed by domestic livestock or lost to land development.

So lets just all do our duty and start putting some of it back...

## *Water-Wise:*

I always preach that we need to get rid of grass, but by that I am referring to turf lawns; exotic cool season grasses *not* native to our region. These grasses typically require as much as 40 to 60 inches of rainfall a year to sustain growth, planted in a climate that gets on average 10 to 12 inches a year.. you do the math, it just doesn't make good sense. Beside the sustainability issue, wall to wall turf is pretty boring and we can do better.

Ornamental Grasses require on average very little water once established. These versatile plants are one more element that we can add to the landscape instead of traditional mowed lawns that cover most of the suburban landscape, wasting water. That is drinking water, potable water – a limited resource. Water use in Southern California is more than double that of the national average because water is used extensively to irrigate lawns, gardens and fill swimming pools. And yet when we drive down the Interstate 5 fwy there are orchards and farms now abandoned because of water shortages... makes you think.

## Ornamental Grasses

### *A Bit of Botany:*

Just a bit, here goes:

*Sedges have edges*

*Rushes are round*

*Grasses are hollow*

*What have you found?*



*Sedges have edges*



*Rushes are round*



*Grasses are hollow*

This little rhyme can help in identifying the different types of ornamental grasses, sedges and rushes, one from another. Note: never cut plants growing in the wild, just do a 'feel' test. And are there some exceptions to this rule? Sure, but generally this is a good key. The practical difference is that Grasses typically need sun and dryer soils, Sedges can tolerate some shade and may prefer more moisture. Rushes do tend to grow in or near the water (remember Moses in the rushes?), but many do not necessarily require a lot of water... Also grasses tend to hold their stalks and flowers high above the foliage making them a bit 'showier', (some people think 'weedier'), while sedges hold their flowers within the foliage, rather than above it, giving them a more 'tidy' appearance.

### *Clumpers, runners & sprinters:*

Grasses grow in a couple of ways:

Clumping grasses are also referred to as bunch grasses, many of the native California grasses are in this category. These grasses increase slowly in girth as they grow and form 'tufts'. They can be very small, to 12 inches tall, or huge like a Pampas grass to 8 ft. Running grasses grow by creeping stems. Above ground these stems are called stolons. Below ground these stems are called rhizomes. Some running grasses can be highly invasive and a pain in the neck to get rid of - think Bermuda Grass. These are the 'sprinters' of the grass world, not satisfied with a steady 'jog' or even a good run, they rush to overtake all available space ... avoid them, unless you *want* a grass to colonize a large area as in the case of Buffalo grass which is a native prairie grass used as a low water lawn substitute.

### *Cool Season & Warm Season:*

We can generally group ornamental grasses into one of two categories - warm season or cool season. Each of these groups goes dormant in the opposite season. The majority of our lawns are planted in cool season grasses - why do they stay green in the summer then? Because we pump thousands of gallons of water on them to keep them that way. Many ornamental grasses are warm season grasses - meaning they have active growth in the spring and summer and go dormant in the fall.

## Ornamental Grasses

### *Cool Season & Warm Season:*

Everyone needs a rest, it is nature's way. Ornamental grasses have their time of active growth, then they take a rest. The problem (as I see it) in Southern California is this: the general public has unrealistic expectations as it regards landscape performance. In other parts of the country, a period of dormancy is an accepted part of the seasonal cycle. In our Mediterranean climate, grasses have become the Greyhounds of the garden - pushed and pushed beyond their natural limits to perform. We pay a price for these unrealistic expectations; yes, I am back to the water issue - but it is a fact. In addition to water, we then add in more and more fertilizer to push performance even further, then we have ground water contamination... this problem just goes on and on. I don't mean to sound gloomy on the subject, and actually, I am not. Gardens that are appropriate for their climate and ecology, gardens that truly create a 'sense of place' are exciting, dynamic and beautiful. I do however want to emphasize the very real fact that our traditional approach to the landscape can not continue as it has with wall to wall green grass as the default go to landscape solution. Okay, off the soap box and back to this issue of dormancy - beauty is in the eye of the beholder. With a bit more knowledge comes more awareness and a certain level of sophistication. New eyes with which to see if you will. I dream of the day when the majority of the population views the soft golden hues of a late and lazy summer in California as a lovely thing, when the form of fountain grasses standing tall in their buff colored winter coats are appreciated...

As it regards ornamental grasses; can you extend the 'green' period of some cool season grasses by providing additional water through the warmer months? Sure - some of them. But that additional water is applied at a low to moderate rate delivered by a drip system. Just a drink now and then, allowing soils to dry out in between watering, not a daily dose.

Warm season grasses are going to go dormant no matter what you do because as winter temperatures become colder and days get shorter they naturally go to sleep. It is just the way it is. My point: appreciate plants for what they are. When designing with grasses consider the fact that there are plenty of evergreen plants suitable to the water-wise garden that can act as a foil, a background, for the golden buff colors, sometimes rust or orange colors of dormant grasses.

### *Designing with Ornamental Grasses:*

Ornamental grasses are generally easy to grow. They grow rapidly, often reaching mature size in only one or two seasons. There are many shapes, sizes, colors, and textures to choose from. The most important thing when designing with grasses is do your homework, and understand what you are planting. As with any plant, finding out *before* you put it in the ground can build in success and avoid a number of headaches. Some questions to ask when selecting grass species are:

How big is it going to get

Is it invasive ( a runner-sprinter: beware!)

Does it re-seed ? (this is not always a bad thing... see maintenance section for tips)

Is it a warm season or cool season grass?

A few good 'rules' to follow when designing with Ornamental Grasses:

- Always place plants with generous spacing allowing for the room necessary to show off their full form. Over crowding will diminish the beauty of grasses.
- Light: one glorious characteristic of many ornamental grasses is their ability to capture sun light, be it early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

## Ornamental Grasses

### *Designing with Ornamental Grasses:*

- Light (con't): Use this to your advantage by placing grasses where they are backlit (direction of the light is behind the plant).
- Autumn: Many grasses (especially the warm season grasses, that go dormant in the winter) put on their big show in the fall. Flowers held aloft on slender stems tower above the lower foliage. Grasses also can change color in the fall beyond golden or buff to orange, rust, and purple.
- Less is often more: When designing with grasses for the general landscape, limit your selections to just a few species and plant in groups or masses for big impact. Your design will quickly become unfocused if you try to put too many varieties in the landscape.
- Create a grass garden or border: On the other hand if you become fascinated by these plants (easy to do) create a garden *specifically* for your collection of ornamental grasses. This would be referred to as a border, just as in perennial borders. Defining an area as a specific garden with a particular theme will help keep the overall landscape from becoming a chaotic jumble.
- Focal points: Individual grasses can be used singularly as dramatic accents in the landscape, drawing focus. Grasses look especially good showcased in pots and containers. Some of the more aggressive runners do well in pots and solve the problem of not sharing space well: a win-win. Another consideration is a grass that may want more moisture – this also makes it a good candidate for container growing, as most pots and containers need a daily watering anyway. One that comes to mind is Ribbon Grass (*Phalaris*) this is an invasive running species that wants regular water – not so good in the garden but great in a pot. In Corona this species would want some afternoon shade.
- Water: grasses are a natural around water, pools or ponds.
- Boulders: grasses also look great when mixed with large landscape boulders in the landscape.
- Meadows: great as lawn replacements. *Carex divulsa* – Berkley Sedge, is a good choice. The favorite of my friend Carlos at Green Belt Growers is *Festuca mairei*. *Carex pansa* - California Meadow Grass works well too. When designing a meadow rely on one primary species such as these mentioned and then add a couple taller grasses as accents, with just a touch here and there. A good selection for an accent would be Slender Veldt Grass (*Pennisetum spathiolatum*).
- Grasses and perennials: Grasses can add much to the perennial garden, as the summer season lengthens and the rest of the garden may be getting a bit tired, many grasses are just coming into their own. As with any other perennial garden composition, consider mature size and spacing. Taller goes to the back of the border shorter plants to the front. Consider the height of the finished plant including flowers – which can add a lot of height. And the good news is – if you miscalculate and your grasses outgrow their space, they are relatively easy to dig up in the fall and move for the next season. They are tough and forgiving.
- Resources: Designers such as Piet Oudolf and the partnership of Landscape Architects Wolfgang Oehme & James van Sweden have been at the center of the movement toward using ornamental grasses in the landscape. Their work is stunning. Here on the west coast we have John Greenlee, whose nursery in Pomona has provided many design projects with a wide variety of ornamental grasses. His book 'Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses' is a much used resource in my own library.

## Ornamental Grasses

### *Bulbs and Grasses:*

Here is a trick I learned from John Greenlee – bulbs and grasses are perfect companions. Many grasses require cutting back at the end of winter, and the resulting areas can look bare. The good news is that bulbs – Daffodils and Iris in particular - love the early spring and are ready to bloom at this time. The trick is to cut back the grasses *before* the bulbs begin coming up. As the bulbs then begin to fade the grasses are beginning to produce their new growth. In the case of Daffodils this is a real win-win because you must leave that old foliage on the Daffodils to supply the bulb with the nutrition it needs to make next years crop of flowers, and the new growth of the ornamental grasses helps to cover that up. A great system. Grasses and bulbs look great together, another plus. By selecting early, middle and late season Daffodils and Iris you can extend the seasonal show of flowers. Some bulbs that work well later in the season are Crocoasmia, Watsonia, and Amaryllis Belladonna. All of these bulbs need very little in the way of care; I plant and walk away. When blooming vigor stops it may be that the plant needs to be lifted and divided – this should happen in the early fall. I find it necessary to do this about every 4 years with Iris and have never bothered with my Daffodils, they do not seem to care.

### *Care and Maintenance of Ornamental grasses:*

Establishment - Generally speaking ornamental grasses are one of the easiest plants you can grow. They grow rapidly and often reach a mature height and size in one or two seasons. There is a large selection that need very little in the way of water once established. Once established. We hear that a lot – what does it mean? It means that the plant has established its roots into the surrounding soils. Once it does that, it has a bigger resource with which to draw moisture out of the soil. Generally speaking this establishment happens in one season. Planting: dig a hole, plant the grass, back fill with native soil. Most grasses are not fussy about soil but *do* want some drainage, so breaking up the soil (in effect aerating it) is very helpful. You can add amendments but it is not critical. Do not exceed more than 25% amendment to the native soil mix. When digging a planting hole in clay soils it is important to NOT have smooth sides. A planting hole with smooth sides works like a pot and will encourage roots to circle around and around in the hole – not good. You want those roots to get out and establish into the surrounding soil. Take the edge of the shovel or a hand pick and rough up the sides of the planting hole so the roots have something to grab on to. Then make sure you provide enough water to the plant to keep it from drying out, especially during the first few weeks. Ornamental grasses do very well on drip systems. Cutting back: many warm season grasses will require cutting back after they have gone dormant, but don't be in too a big a hurry. The winter form and the flowers will persist and add an element of design to the garden when perhaps not much else is going on. I like to use the flowers of a large Miscanthus grass in my winter Christmas arrangements. The trick is this: around the middle of January start looking at the base of your grasses to see if new growth is pushing up, you want to cut back the plants hard – within a few inches of the ground – right about then. After a year or so you will get the rhythm of the plant and have a good idea of when to cut it back. What you do not want to do is wait until you have 5 to 6 inches of new growth and then cut back, because you will inevitably cut into the new growth which will then have ragged edges and this ruins the overall beauty of the plant. Of course you can cut back anytime during the dormant period but I do it this way to minimize the empty look in the landscape. Once the weather warms up and that new growth begins, it doesn't take long until that plant is up and thriving. The interim period is where those bulbs can make all of the difference.

## Ornamental Grasses

### *Care and Maintenance of Ornamental grasses (con't):*

Managing re-seeding grasses: There are some species of grasses that re-seed, some heavily. The use of pre-emergence products is recommended to control this.

Following you will find a couple of pages of plant lists. The one below is a re-print from an article about John Greenlee, you may find it helpful.

### GREENLEE'S GRASS PICKS

To most of us, a meadow is at least an acre large. But to John Greenlee, alias "The Grassman," a meadow is in the mind. Even a narrow parkway strip or tiny island surrounded by flower beds can evoke the feeling of a meadow if it's planted with the right grasses, says Greenlee. Following are his recommendations for a meadow look in a variety of spaces. All of the accent grasses listed provide showy material for bouquets.

### EVERGREEN GRASSES TO SIMULATE A NATURAL MEADOW

All grow 1 to 2 feet tall and should not be mowed.

- \* European meadow sedge (*Carex remota*): sun or shade.
- \* Berkeley sedge (*Carex tumulicola*): sun or shade.
- \* Maires fescue (*Festuca mairei*): good choice for desert.
- \* Autumn moor grass (*Sesleria autumnalis*): sun.
- \* Meadow moor grass (*Sesleria heuffleriana*): sun.

### MEADOW GRASSES TO WALK ON:

All grow 4 to 8 inches tall and can be left alone or mowed occasionally.

- \* Mosquito grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*): dormant in winter, good in the desert; sun.
- \* Buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*): dormant in winter, good in the desert; sun.
- \* California meadow sedge (*Carex pansa*): creeping evergreen grass; sun or shade.
- \* Valley meadow sedge (*Carex praegracilis*): creeping evergreen grass; sun or shade.
- \* Catlin sedge (*Carex texensis*): clumping evergreen grass; sun or shade.

### ACCENT GRASSES FOR SUNNY MEADOWS OR BORDERS:

- \* Eulalia or Japanese silver grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*): 5 to 6 feet tall.
- \* Evergreen miscanthus (*Miscanthus transmorrisonensis*): 5-6 feet tall; is only semi-ever green in our climate depending on how cold the winter gets. Best cut back to the ground every year.
- \* Deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*): 3 to 4 feet tall.
- \* Fountain grass (*Pennisetum*): many varieties; 1 to 4 feet tall, depending on variety.
- \* Giant feather grass (*Stipa gigantea*): 2 to 3 feet tall (6 feet when in bloom).
- \* Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*): 1 to 2 feet tall. Note this grass re-seeds heavily. It is not suitable for areas that may abut native areas or water ways.

### ACCENT GRASSES FOR SHADY MEADOWS OR BORDERS:

All grow 2 to 3 feet tall.

- \* Fall-blooming reed grass (*Calamagrostis arundinacea brachytricha*): an asset in woodland plantings.
- \* Drooping sedge (*Carex pendula*): likes moisture; good along paths or walks.
- \* Northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*): good in damp locations or by pond edges.

## Ornamental Grasses - Plant List

Botanic Name	Common Name	Tall x Wide	Height Flowers	Notes
Carex	Sedges			CS
C. divulsa (bunching)	Berkely Sedge	18" x 18"	NA	M
C. pansa (running)	Calif. Meadow Grass	12" x 14"	NA	M
C. pendula	Hanging Sedge	24" x 24"	seed pods	A-P
C. testacia	Orange Sedge	18" x 18"	NA	FORG-P

Festuca	Fescue Grasses			CS
F. gluaca	Blue Fescue	12" x 12"	18"	A-MS
F. mairei	Maire's Fescue	2-3ft x 2-3ft	3-4ft	M

Juncus	Rush			evergreen
J. patens	Calif Grey Rush	3ft x 18"	golden	A-FB-MS
J. Carmen's japanese	Green Rush	24"x18"	golden	A-P

Leymus c. 'Canyon Prince'	Canyon Prince Rye	2-3ft x 2-3ft	3-4ft	A-FB
---------------------------	-------------------	---------------	-------	------

Pennisetum	Fountain Grasses			WS
P. setaceum	species-do not use	3ft x 3ft	4ft - white	RS
P. s. Fairy Tails	Fairy Tails	3-5ft x 2-3ft	4-6ft	MS-A
P. messiacum	Bunny Tails	24" x 24"	3ft - red	MS-A-FR
P. rubra	Red Fountain Grass	3-4ft x 3-4ft	5ft - red	A-FR
P. spathiolatum	NCN	18" x 18"	4ft - white	A

Melinus nerviglumis	Pink Crystals	12" x 12"	18" - pink	WS
note: this beautiful grass may do best in a pot, needs drainage and moderate water				

Miscanthus	Maiden Grasses			WS
M. sinensis	many varieties	all with showy flowers		A
M.s. Morning Light		3ft x 3ft	4-6ft	A
M.s. Zebroidus	Zebra Miscanthus	yellow spots on foliage		A
M. transmorrisonensis	semi-evergreen	5ft x 5ft	6-7ft	A-S
note these grasses are large and go dormant - place <i>behind</i> evergreen shrubs				

### Notes:

A: accent FB: Blue Foliage FORG: Orange Foliage FR: Red Foliage MS: Good as mass planting M: Meadow  
S: Good for screening RS: Can be a problem with re-seeding, use pre-emergent P: pendulus form

Botanic Name	Common Name	Tall x Wide	Height Flowers	Notes
Muhlenbergia	Muhly Grasses			WS
<i>M. capillaris</i>	Ruby Mist	18" x 18"	36" pink	MS-A
<i>M. lindheimerii</i>	Lindheimer Muhly	18" x 18"	showy	FB
<i>M. ridgens</i>	Deer Grass	3ft x 3ft	5-6ft	A-MS

Seslaria	Moor Grass			evergreen
<i>S. autumnalis</i>	Autumn Moor Grass	1-2ft x 1-2ft	1-2ft wht	A-M
<i>S. caerulea</i>	Blue Moor Grass	12"-18" x 2ft	2ft black	A-M

<i>Spartina bakerii</i>	Cord Grass	5-6ft x 2-3ft		A-E
Note: this is an evergreen clumping beach grass recommended by Carlos at Greenbelt Growers				

Stipa				WS
<i>S. arundancea</i>	Pheasant's Tail Grass	12" x 12"		FORG-P
<i>S. tenuissima</i>	Mexican Feather Grass	18" x 12"	caution	RS!!

Notes:

A: accent FB: Blue Foliage FORG: Orange Foliage FR: Red Foliage MS: Good as mass planting M: Meadow  
S: Good for screening RS: Can be a problem with re-seeding, use pre-emergent P: pendulus form