



ORNAMENTAL GRASS GARDENING

One gardening charm getting a great deal of attention lately is the use of ornamental grasses in the home landscape. Ornamental grasses encompass an extremely diverse group of decorative plants with exceptional qualities of beauty and grace in the garden. With heights varying anywhere from four to five inches tall to fifteen feet or more, a selection may be made to accommodate the scale of virtually any garden from one the size of a yoga mat to one that's big as Rich Stadium.

Few other plants have as many attributes as the grasses. First, there are their graceful forms which tend to include a fountain-shaped base topped with feathery flower panicles. Then, there are their sound effects in the lightest of breezes. This is followed by their diverse four-season beauty and the fact that most of them are wonderful in both fresh and dried flower arrangements. Finally, nearly all of them provide welcomed materials for the birds who like to use the flowers and foliage for nest-building.

Grasses are useful in the garden as single specimens, for massing, as ground covers, privacy screens, companion plants, and backdrops for perennial borders. Some prefer full sun, others full shade, while most can tolerate some of each and most enjoy fertile well-drained soil.

Some grasses are evergreen while others turn straw-colored when set upon by shorter days and freezing winter temperatures. A recent garden arrival, 'Andes Silver' dwarf pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*), was still unabashedly evergreen a month after our winter thermometer registered fourteen below zero F. This level of hardiness is unusual. Most pampas grasses will not survive Western New York winters, preferring USDA zones 7-10. However, this and one other dwarf cultivar, C. s. 'Patagonia', both from the frigid Peruvian Andes mountain range, show great promise for those who've encountered these gorgeous plants in warmer locales and yearned to have them in their own garden.

The vast majority of hardy perennial ornamental grasses undergo a complete winter transformation in color and texture, offering a seasonal variation of great interest to any gardener. Straw and brown-colored leaves, stalks, and awns (seed heads) post well against newly fallen snow and the whispering of their stalks provides rare music in the winter landscape.

The larger sturdier grass varieties, including *Miscanthus*, are occasionally flattened to the ground by early wet snows. With inspiring resilience, they simply spring right back up within a day or two once the bulk of the snow has melted. Another happy habit that they have is that the typical growth pattern of many perennial grasses is to grow outward in ever-enlarging concentric rings, creating a hollow core that provides a dandy floodlight location for seasonal uplighting.

Two fine arboretums that have a good selection of ornamental grasses to study are the Niagara Parks Commission School of Horticulture in Ontario and Cornell University's Plantation. The first is located along the Niagara Parkway midway between the Rainbow Bridge and the Queenston Lewiston Bridge. In addition to their fine collection of ornamental grasses, many perennials, ground covers, shrubs, and specimen trees await the horticulturally-afflicted. Take your camera and a notebook so that when you return home you'll have a photo of what you liked and the Latin name so you can order exactly what you saw. Don't forget a passport or a driver's license so that your interrogation at the border is uneventful.

You could also drive your Mini-Cooper to Ithaca where the Cornell University Plantation and arboretum awaits you. Their wonderful collection of ornamental grasses, herb gardens, unusual shrubs, trees, and woodland garden plants will accelerate your pulse. Take a full day if possible and don't rush through it. Aside from the flora, there's a small arboretum gift and bookstore.

Come in to get suggestions and help with your planting.

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