

Most are adaptable to any soil condition

Ornamental grasses add year-round pizzazz to gardens

Ornamental grasses have risen sharply in popularity over the past few years. They add year-round interest, colour, rhythm and movement to gardens.

Most ornamental grasses are adaptable to almost any soil condition, including clay soil, and are available in a variety of sizes and colors. Some grasses are happy growing even in the most inhospitable areas. For example, some of the lesser-known grasses thrive in drought conditions. Others like wet, soggy soil or coastal locations. There are even grasses that repel deer and mosquitoes. All ornamental grasses are very low-maintenance plants that are virtually disease and pest-free. Here are a few of the less common ornamental grasses which you may not find at your local nursery but

can order through mail order catalogs or online.

Drought-resistant grasses are numerous. Blue-green sedge is perfect for massing in dry areas, but is invasive and will take over if not controlled. It grows to 12 inches in sun or shade. Wachtposten, another sedge, is a little taller at 36 inches with an upright habit. Hair grass is a wonderful ground cover, growing to a foot.

Grasses for coastal wetlands include many different types. Dune grass grows two to three feet tall in full sun and is very saltwater tolerant. Plant this along the edge of your yard. Broom sedge also grows two to three feet tall and is very tolerant of extreme conditions, including salt spray. It prefers full sun of at least six hours a day. Wheat grass is only eight to 10 inches tall with lovely blue foliage

and long-lasting flowers for cutting.

Grasses for marshy wetlands include the following. Carex gracilis is very flood tolerant and thrives in shady places. It will reach two feet in height. Manna grass grows two to three feet tall and loves moisture and full sun. It can be found in a shorter version, one to two feet tall, with variegated foliage.

To repel mosquitoes, lemon grass thrives in part sun and shade, grows three to five feet tall and is especially attractive when planted in groups of three or five. Try planting some around a patio or deck. Unfortunately this plant is only hardy in the south, but can be grown as an annual in northern climates, and if planted in a pot, can be brought indoors during the winter.

As a deer repellent, you can't miss with Miscanthus. There are many varieties to choose from. They can range from two feet to over 10 feet tall. For example, one of the tallest is the giant Chinese silver grass. This plant makes an excellent screen, blooming late into fall. One of the smallest is Dixieland. As a dwarf, it grows only three to four feet tall and makes an excellent specimen plant.

Pennisetum incomptum is the perfect grass for hillsides where soil stabilization is important. At three to four feet in height, its tall white plumes will blow gently in a June breeze.

For screening, ornamental grasses are ideal if you need a screen in a hurry and don't want to wait the 10-20 years for a hedge or evergreen grouping to grow up. Arundo donax is unbeatable. Its large canes reach over nine feet tall and are suitable for the center of a circular bed as well as the edge of a property. Another good performer is Erianthus ravennae with 12-foot flower stalks of fluffy plumes in fall. Miscanthus floridulus will reach 10 to 14 feet by mid-summer, so if you need a screen in a hurry, this is the grass to choose. Bamboo is another unusual plant worth considering. Bambusa vulgaris puts on an impressive display. It can grow 15 to 25 feet in height, in full sun or partial shade. But beware—bamboos can be terribly invasive and must be contained below ground if spreading is not desired. Alternatively plant bamboo in a large container for a stunning and original topic of interest and conversation.

When selecting an ornamental grass, the most important factor to consider is the light requirements. Study your site. Full sun means six or more hours of sunlight per day. It is possible to improve soil if necessary, but you cannot easily change a shady location to a sunny one. Try to match the plant to the lighting of the location you've chosen for an ornamental grass.

When planting ornamental grasses, dig a hole at least deep enough to hold the root ball. Digging deeper than necessary will benefit the fibrous root system. Soil gets compacted over time. Tilling double deep allows the roots to spread easier. Some grass roots will grow two or more feet into the soil. This quality allows the grasses to find moisture deep in the ground and protects soil from erosion, but it is also the reason some grasses are extremely difficult to eradicate.

Once the site and plant are chosen, remove the plant from its pot and loosen the roots. Don't worry—grasses don't mind having their roots disturbed. Place the plant in the hole and water. Return the soil to the hole and water thoroughly again. A deep, slow watering is best.

As for all new plantings, you may want to baby the ornamental grasses until the roots get established. Once established, though, they require very little care. An occasional sprinkling of fertilizer each year will give them a boost, but is not a requirement.

With their graceful arching foliage and soft movement, ornamental grasses add a touch of elegance and character to any yard.

—By Doris A. Blac



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