

Until recently, my clients rarely listed ornamental grasses on their “must have” landscaping lists. Today, roses and lilacs still top most lists, but more and more people are also requesting ornamental grasses as they recognize the beautiful textures, colors and movements they contribute.

Of course, smart landscape designers have long been privy to the benefits of incorporating grasses into their designs – but not just for their good looks. On a continent that once contained the largest grassland prairie on earth, these plants readily thrive in our landscapes.

In addition to being virtually pest and disease free, they require little fertilizing, maintenance or water. (Compare that to ever-thirsty turf lawns that cost Americans an estimated 30 billion dollars a year to plant, maintain and promote.)

Our growing ecological awareness and recognition of these resilient, low maintenance qualities are the primary forces driving the renewed popularity of ornamental grasses in America. Their versatility and aesthetic benefits aren't far behind.



Laid Back Landscaping

by Jason Krivanek photos courtesy of www.BloomingPrairie.net

AN ELECTIC CAST: From a petite two inches to a towering 15 feet in height, ornamental grasses grow in every nook and cranny of the globe. While most grasses prefer sunnier locales, a few varieties tolerate shade. For landscaping purposes, rushes, sedges and bamboos are generally included when referring to ornamental grasses.

Two main categories define and help determine how ornamental grasses are used in the landscape. Running grasses are those that spread by underground stems called rhizomes or above-ground stems called stolons. Most running grasses are invasive and can overwhelm a garden. However, they can be quite valuable in a large, open spot, where their spreading ground cover can control erosion. The common ribbon grass with its variegated foliage is one such example.

Clumping grasses are a better behaved lot. This group, which contains a wide variety of shapes and forms, from upright to mounded, stay where you plant them – making them a more ideal choice for the home landscape.

SUPPORTING AND STARRING ROLES: The strong, vertical nature of many ornamental grasses makes them a terrific partner to other perennials. They group especially well with shrub roses and more “airy” perennials such as Russian sage, baby's breath and yarrow. They also look great next to denser perennials such as rudbeckia, autumn joy sedum and asters.

While ornamental grasses play a supporting role for much of the season, they become the star of the garden show when autumn's curtain goes up. This is when most grasses “bloom” (or show what is properly known as their “inflorescence”). As fall turns into winter, the stalks and inflorescence give the landscape structure after other plants have gone to bed. For many gardeners, the sight of frost or a snow dusting on the feathery plumes of a Miscanthus grass can be every bit as beautiful as a blooming rose in June.

Ornamental grasses don't need to be restricted to naturalistic or informal settings. On the contrary, the uniform habit and

dramatic structure of most ornamental grasses allow novel adaptations to more traditional plant choices in formal settings. Planted as matching pairs on either side of a door, ornamental grasses can create a look every bit as formal as boxwood topiaries – with a lot less upkeep. As a traditional “spike” is used in the center of a container planting, ornamental grasses can be thought of as the “spike” in the landscape.

COLORFUL SETS: While ornamental grasses aren't the first plants most people think of when adding color to the landscape, they are certainly not without color. It is the subtle and ever-changing color of their foliage that defines the species. Much like trees, grasses undergo changes that reflect the passing seasons. A plant that is a luxuriant green in May can turn rich gold or barn red by the time the kids are out trick-or-treating.

Variegated varieties add a long season of color to the garden palette. The popular “Zebrinas” Miscanthus grass features gold stripes while “Elijah Blue” Fescue adds



a blue hue to the garden year round. “Bowles Golden” Carex features bright yellow tufts and Japanese Blood Grass, is – you guessed it – red.

The most commonly planted ornamental grass has come to be “Karl Forester” Calamagrostis (feather reed grass), in part because of its vigorous early season growth compared with other grasses. Loose, feathery pink “flowers” appear in June. As the seed heads mature, they become a golden tan color that lasts through the fall season. Both the leaves and flowers of “Karl Forester” grass are very upright, giving it an architectural quality. While it can be used in tight spaces, it is often planted in mass as well.

Although most ornamental grasses prefer full sun, a few are suitable for shadier locations. My favorites come from the Hakone family, especially the yellow and lime variegated cultivar “Aureola.” Plants from the Carex family also prosper in shade and combine well with hostas.

A STUNNING PERFORMANCE: Two bonuses of ornamental grasses that are often overlooked are movement and sound. Their vertical nature captures the breeze, lending a sense of animation to the landscape and producing a rushing sound.

Ornamental grasses are also extraordinarily translucent. When side-lit or back-lit by the sun (early or late in the day) grasses take on a luminous quality unsurpassed by other landscape plants. This ability to shine is even more valuable come late autumn and winter when flowering perennials have gone to bed for the season and the annuals have been tossed out with the fallen leaves.

Also, with the growing popularity of outdoor lighting, few plants provide as much

drama as grasses when featured with accent lighting. If you have a large piece of ground, consider incorporating larger varieties into your privacy barrier. A variety of deciduous and evergreen shrubs and grasses makes for a much more intriguing border than a standard straight hedge. Pampas grasses can reach as high as 14 feet but, remember, they need to be cut down in the spring, so carefully site them where you won’t mind sacrificing some early spring privacy.

Even if you don’t have any ground at all, many ornamental grass varieties look outstanding when used in container plantings. Although it’s an annual where I live, purple fountain grass is a mainstay in my container-planting designs. Grasses usually look best when they can have a whole pot to themselves that can be grouped with other pots filled with flowering annuals or perennials.

CLEARING THE STAGE: Ornamental grasses along the side of the house, especially on the south or west side, are a terrific choice for a low-maintenance foundation planting. While shrubs can require hours to extract all the dead leaves they’ve caught, grasses provide little opportunity for leaves to catch – making both fall and spring cleanup a breeze.

Drawbacks to grasses include the “dead period” between cutting them back in early spring and the emergence of new growth. Planting early spring bulbs, such as daffodils nearby, can help to fill this void. Many ornamental grasses also benefit from dividing every few years. The same aspects that give grasses their strength can make dividing them a bit of a chore. It is usually easier to dig up the entire plant and soak the root ball before attempting to split it up with a pitch fork, sharp flat shovel or hand saw.

Extra divisions can be shared with friends, family members or the neighbor who tells you how much she adores the seed heads on your Miscanthus grass each fall but never makes it to the nursery to buy her own. (Hopefully, you won’t have to plant the divisions for her, too.)

RAVE REVIEWS: Check with your local extension office for advice on the type of ornamental grasses that grow best in your region. Visit your local nursery to ask questions and peruse plants firsthand. Keep in mind that grasses – even more than most perennials – look much better once established in the ground, rather than restricted in a pot waiting for purchase. Once given the chance to put their roots in the ground, ornamental grasses rarely disappoint. So, if you haven’t given them a chance in your landscape yet...what are you waiting for? ■

A love of the native Great Plains landscape has been the inspiration behind Jason Krivanek’s writing and gardening business. You can see more of his work online at www.BloomingPrairie.net