



IS IT TIME TO CUT THOSE GRASSES BACK?

By Sue McDavid

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Ornamental grasses are one of the most beautiful and carefree plants in a landscape, but some care is needed to keep them looking good. One common concern many gardeners have is the timing of cutting grasses back, and this article goes through tips and techniques for doing that.

Gardeners need to first know whether a grass is classified as cool season, warm season or evergreen because some rules about cutting back change slightly depending on which type it is. Cool season grasses put on most of their growth in spring before temperatures begin going over 75 degrees, and again in the fall when temperatures cool down. They generally maintain good color throughout summer, but will not grow much when it is hot. Warm season grasses do not begin growing until mid to late spring, or even early summer. Their major growth and flowering occurs when it is hot, and usually turn shades of brown for the winter. Evergreen grasses can include plants that look like grasses, such as Sedges and Rushes, but are not actually botanically classified as such.

Cut back warm season grasses in fall or by late winter. These grasses turn shades of brown as the weather turns colder, and once this occurs, they can be trimmed back at almost any time. Some gardeners like to tidy their gardens in the fall or, if they live in an area where fire danger is high (like most of El Dorado County), warm season grasses can be trimmed to just a few inches above the soil line. If fire is generally not a problem, leaving the dried grasses and seed heads give winter interest, plus protect the crown from frost damage. If these grasses are not trimmed until late winter, make sure to cut them back to the ground before new growth begins. Pennisetum (Fountain Grass), Miscanthus and Panicum (Switch Grass) are in this category.

Cut back cool season grasses in very early spring, but leave about one-third of the plant in place. Trimming cool season grasses too severely can harm the plant. Fescue grasses and Blue Oat Grass are in this category, and may also remain evergreen.

Evergreen grasses never go completely dormant and should not be cut back. If they start to look a bit shabby with some browning throughout the clump, just comb these areas out or cut out the dead stems.

With a little effort at the appropriate time, ornamental grasses can stay looking good for many years. Just follow the general guidelines above, and grasses in a landscape will continue to flourish.

Join Master Gardener and retired meteorologist Steve Savage at this Saturday's free public class, "Water Efficient Gardening in the Urban Landscape." The three hour class starts at 9:00 a.m. on March 29th in the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville. Learn about when to water and watering for special situations, as well as effects of fertilizers, mulch and soils. How to program irrigation controllers, harvesting and conserving water, and creating hydro-zones will be covered.

Save the date! The 5th annual Master Gardener spring plant sale will be on April 19, 2014 in the Veterans Memorial Building Parking lot. Many varieties of heirloom tomatoes will be featured along with perennials, trees, shrubs, and groundcovers that do well in our foothills climate. Plants that are considered water-wise will be prominently pointed out.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.