



Landscaping with Ornamental Grasses

By Shilo Nielsen

UCCE El Dorado Master Gardener

Who wouldn't want a plant that stands up to heat, snow, wet soil, drought, deer, sun, shade, and rocky soil? Grasses can stand up to these conditions, and more. There are so many wonderful varieties; there is a grass for every situation and many that will tolerate most, if not all, of the above conditions. One that immediately comes to mind is our own native Deer Grass, *Muhlenbergia rigens*. A lovely round clumping grass, it gets two to three feet and indeed will tolerate all the previously mentioned challenges. This versatility makes grasses a great choice for most gardening situations.

Too often grasses are thought of as "weeds." While there are some local weeds, especially introduced annuals such as foxtails, the majority of ornamental grasses are perennial and well-behaved.

When we think of these perennial grasses, often grass-like sedges and rushes come to mind. While not true grasses, they can be used similarly, although they are not as diverse as the grasses. Bamboo is a true grass that often gets a bad rap. Indeed some running types can be very invasive, as they can search out water 30 feet away, under concrete. Clumping bamboos are much better behaved, and should not be feared. Equisetum is a very invasive (non-grass) rush that can take over ponds or other waterways quickly. Turf grasses such as Bermuda and Zoysia spread by runners and can get invasive and very hard to remove. There are also a handful of grasses that reseed easily, but they generally can be controlled by cutting seed heads or pulling the seedlings. These include Mexican Feather Grass (*Nassella*), and some Pennisetums; reseeding can be a good thing if they are intended to be a ground cover. Pampas grass is a grass that has become a weed, especially on the coast, and although sterile varieties are available, it is not recommended in California.

Grasses can be used in mass plantings, as barrier hedges, and are great companions to other plants. They bring texture and movement to the garden. They come in sizes ranging from six inch Fescues to six foot

Miscanthus; from round clumps to upright forms, arching forms, tufted forms, and some even combine forms (such as Calamagrostis). There are a range of colors as well; blue (fescue, oat grass), purple (purple fountain grass, purple muhly grass), golds (Japanese forest grass, some sedges, Mexican feather grass), red (Japanese blood grass) and of course many shades of green. Flower color can also vary, from creams to gold and pink/purple hues.

Seasonal variation is also a notable feature. Some grasses are called cool-season and start growing in late winter, generally flowering in spring to early summer. These include fescues, millet, and Mexican feather grass. Warm-season grasses can come up in spring, but shine when the heat of summer beats up other plants. They generally bloom in late-summer to fall. Included are many Miscanthus, deer grass, Pennisetums, and forest grass. They will hold seed heads well into winter, attract birds, and add some interest to the winter garden.

Planting grasses where they can be observed with the sun behind them, or backlit, is one of the best ways to enjoy them. They don't call one variety of Miscanthus "Morning Light" for nothing! Hillside planting often works nicely for this, and grasses have the added benefit of erosion control due to their fibrous root systems. Think about planting soft grasses with rough plants, such as New Zealand Flax, roses or other thorny bushes. Smaller ones can make a nice soft edge for a walkway, while larger varieties can be a striking focal statement. They also work great as an upright component in a container garden.

Generally, grasses need very little maintenance, although some varieties such as Miscanthus, Pennisetum and Calamagrostis will benefit from being cut down to about six inches in late winter, before the new spring growth emerges. Other grasses such as Deer grass don't even need that. Feather grass looks better if it is cut once a year, but it is not necessary unless a tidier look is preferred in the garden. Forest grass and blood grass die back in winter, and are pretty much self pruning!

There are so many varieties of grasses available, there is no need to stick to the more common ones. See what the mail order catalogs or local nurseries have to offer; hundreds of gorgeous varieties do very well in El Dorado County and all over California.

Come to the Master Gardener class this Saturday, October 26th, for more in-depth information on choosing and caring for ornamental landscape grasses. Learn more about why grasses have become such a popular and beautiful landscape plant! The free class is open to the public, and is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court, Placerville.

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