

# BEAUTIFUL YET LOW-MAINTENANCE LANDSCAPING

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**Q**uestion: What is a low-maintenance plant that could provide beauty and color to landscaping?

**A**nswer: Ornamental grasses and grass-like plants are valued in home landscapes for their hardiness, ease of care, dramatic appearance and the wide variety of colors, textures and sizes available. Ornamental grasses refer to both true grasses and plants that have a grass-like appearance, such as sedges.

Ornamental grasses vary in height and shape, leaf texture, foliage and bloom color. Grasses can fill large and small spaces in just about any type of landscape. Height ranges can be as small as 12 inches (as in several *Carex* varieties) to over 6 feet (as in *Miscanthus* varieties).

Shapes can be stiffly upright (Karl Foerster), flowing and fountain-like (Karly Rose) or mounding (blue oat grass). Foliage color ranges from blue-gray to dark green and even red tones. Some cultivars are variegated or spotted. Foliage texture runs from silky and thread-like (Mexican feather grass) to wide and stiff (*Miscanthus* types). Bloom colors run from golden-brown to nearly white.

Before planting, you should understand the growth habit of the grass. Grasses can be either clump forming or rhizome forming. The clump forming grasses will grow in very nice, neat clumps or mounds. They tend to mix very well with other perennials and will not become invasive. The rhizome forming grasses spread by underground stems and can become very aggressive and invasive. Before selecting a grass, be sure to understand how it grows so you won't be planting a future problem.

Ornamental grasses will grow easily and look lovely if their basic requirements are met. Most require four to six hours of sun each day to look their best, but a few can tolerate more shade. Ornamental grasses must have well-drained soil. Some grass-like

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*Hakonechloa macra*, also known as "Aureola," is a Japanese forest grass with green leaves and golden yellow striping. Bottom left: *Ophiopogon planascapus*, also known as "Nigrescens," is a black mondo grass. Bottom middle: *Calamagrostis acutiflora*, also known as "Karl Foerster." Bottom right: *Panicum virgatum*, also known as switchgrass.

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sedges and rushes will thrive in moist or even wet soils.

As with any other perennial, success depends greatly on soil preparation. Ornamental grasses do not require high amounts of fertilizer. Just a small amount of organic compost and a handful of general purpose fertilizer should do the trick.

It is best to plant your grass in the spring. Plants should be planted no deeper than their previous growing depths and should be well watered after planting. Plants should continue to be watered regularly the first season so they can develop a good root system. Once established, moisture needs vary by species, soil type, temperature and other factors.

Most ornamental grasses are drought tolerant. Drip irrigation is an excellent way to water grasses. It saves water by applying it directly to the roots and reduces the chance of foliar diseases. The most important maintenance is annual spring cutting of the previous year's foliage before new growth begins.

Since many grasses are attractive in the garden in the winter, cutting them back is usually done in the

early spring. Cultivate around grass plants to control weeds. An application of mulch will greatly reduce the need for cultivation as well as watering.

Some popular landscape grasses include:

■ ***Pennisetum orientale* "Karly Rose."** This is a warm-season grass, beginning growth in the spring as frost days come to an end, and then blooms mid to late summer. The soft-pink spikes appear above the blue-green foliage and will get 2 to 3 feet tall.

■ ***Calamagrostis acutiflora* "Karl Foerster"** (feather reed grass). This is a cool-season clump forming evergreen plant. It has a strong upright growth habit. It grows 3 to 5 feet tall. It blooms in the late spring and rests during the heat of the summer. Other cool season grasses include fescues, blue oat grass

and tufted hair grass.

■ ***Ophiopogon planascapus* "Nigrescens"** (black mondo grass). Black mondo grass is quite different. Though grass-like in appearance, it is actually in the lily family. The bloom is flower-like, and the foliage is evergreen.

■ ***Hakonechloa macra* "Aureola"** (Japanese forest grass). This is a shade-loving deciduous perennial grass that forms dense, cascading mounds. It has green leaves with golden-yellow striping. It grows to 15 inches tall.

■ ***Panicum virgatum* (switchgrass).** This beautiful grass has many varieties with showy flowers, excellent fall color and winter interest. Switchgrass prefers full sun in moist to wet soil but is highly adaptable.

*Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*

