

Using grass to spruce up your yard



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Ask a Master Gardener

Question: I'm thinking about taking out some of the turf in my landscape and creating some "islands" of different plantings. I've long admired some of the ornamental grasses and wonder if you can give me some pointers on using them in my yard. Should I be worried about them becoming invasive?

Answer: If you're looking for something to bring pizzaz to your landscape, you can't lose with ornamental grasses. These perennials have many different shapes, sizes, colors and plumes to choose from, while at the same time they are easily maintained. Most are very drought tolerant, requiring little or no irrigation once established.

The term ornamental grass refers to grasses or grass-like plants that are cultivated and chosen mostly for their beauty. They include true grasses from the grass family (Poaceae) as well as rushes and sedges which belong to totally different families. Unlike the hated crabgrass, ornamental grasses are not aggressively invasive, so no worries there. If you do spy some little sprouts, they are easy to pull up.

Grass foliage usually has a strong vertical or fountain form which, along with their feathery plumes, offer a striking texture and contrast to a landscape. Moving at the slightest breeze and catching the light, they are sure to dazzle with colors such as metallic blues, burgundies, whites, yellows



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

Miscanthus grass before cutting

and even stripes such as the zebra grass. As the seasons change, so does the foliage color of some varieties, as well as an impressive array of flower plumes and seed heads at various times of the year.

You can find grasses covering all heights from the familiar towering pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) to the low-growing mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*) which makes a great ground cover. A trip to a local nursery will offer lots of selections from which to choose.

Ornamental grasses are tough and have virtually no insect or disease problems – hence they're the perfect choice for gardeners who desire landscapes requiring less maintenance or fuss.

Grasses grow best in full to part sun, but some, like sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*),

Japanese sedge (*Carex morrowii*) and hair grass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*) prefer shade. Plant your grasses preferably in the spring and at the same level of soil as when in their containers. Water them well and mulch around them to control weeds and hold in moisture.

Most ornamental grasses are not evergreen, but go dormant in the winter. Leaving the dead foliage and plumes will add interest to your winter garden and also helps insulate the crown of the plant as well as offering food for foraging birds. In early spring, just before new growth comes up, they should be cut back 4-6 inches from the crown.

Use your shears to give them a crew cut. For those grasses which are quite tall and unwieldy, I like to truss the foliage up using twine or bungee chords, then whack them

straight across at the suggested height. Then it's easy to gather up the old foliage. Your cut grasses provide a great mulch for a vegetable garden or chop them up to add to your compost pile.

Removing the old leaves will allow plenty of sunlight in to warm the soil, encouraging new growth, as well as discouraging any diseases or insects which may infect new growth.

If your grass clump starts to die out in the center or becomes too large, it's very easy to divide it up into pieces. Divisions don't have to be very large – as long as there are some roots in each section, they should transplant quite nicely. Again, this is done in the early spring, right after shearing them.

Dig up the whole plant, getting as much of the root system as possible. If you have small young plants, just tear apart the

root mass using your gloved hands, but if the root mass is large, use a large sharp knife or sharp spade. Simply replant one division back into the original location, and the rest into other areas of your landscape. Too many? Give them to friends and neighbors. Ornamental grasses should be divided every two to three years.

These lovely grasses combine easily with other shrubs, flowers and trees in landscape beds and borders. The fun is picking which ones to plant to add maximum beauty with minimum effort.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.