

# Ornamental Grasses — Versatile Plants

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Not long ago, one would expect to see ornamental grasses grown primarily in the southern states, arid regions or in exotic gardens. Today, grasses have gained popularity with golf course superintendents in the entire United States for a variety of reasons and cost factors. Ornamental grasses grow faster, require less maintenance and are more tolerant to diseases, insect infestations and drought when compared to ornamental shrubs.

Grasses are no longer used mainly as grass islands in bunkers, but have gained a wider variety of uses by today's superintendents. Examples where these grasses can and have been used include:

- 1) Hard to maintain areas/wet areas
- 2) As natural boundaries or fences
- 3) Providing definition to an area
- 4) Hiding unsightly areas or objects
- 5) Groundcover
- 6) Ornamental gardens
- 7) To expose the membership to different plant varieties
- 8) Aesthetics

In the Chicago area, I have had the opportunity to view different and aesthetic uses for ornamental grass. An outstanding private course on the north side has used a dwarf type fountain grass between incoming and outgoing traffic at the entrance to their club, providing a simple but natural looking barrier. Also, another progressive superintendent has experimented with a wide variety of ornamentals to produce a very picturesque ornamental bed that can be viewed from the clubhouse area. I have also seen other superintendents employ ornamental grasses along edges of ponds, giving a more natural appearance. At Lake Shore Country Club, we use the variety '*Pennisetum alopecuroides*' that grows to a height of three to four feet, as a backdrop to our driving range tee. It also serves as a well defined boundary, as that provides depth to the rear of the tee. There are, of course, additional uses for these plants and many other clubs have utilized them with excellent results.

Ornamental grasses, like their name implies, are primarily used for ornamental purposes. They are categorized mainly as annuals or perennials, Annual complete a life cycle in one year or season. Perennials live and grow for more than two seasons, can be long-lived, living for decades. Some that are considered perennial in one climate, are annuals in other climates. '*Pennisetum setaceum*', for example, is a perennial grass in southern California, but in northern zones, is used as an annual grass.

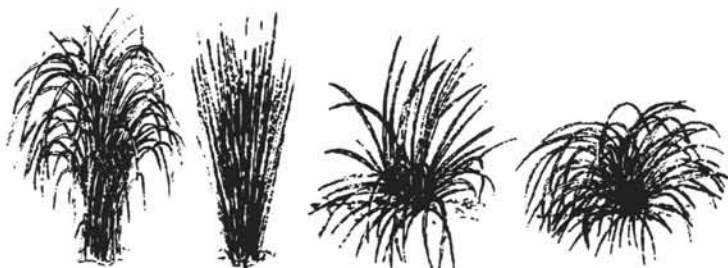
There are two growth habits to these grasses:

- 1) Running
- 2) Clumping

Running grasses are named because of their rhizomes/stolons and the ability to spread or creep. Many of these grasses can become invasive, therefore, it is best to choose the proper plant for the proper area.

Clumping grasses grow in tufts or bunches. They can vary from small two inch mounds to large plants such as pampas grass.

Ornamental grasses come in many forms. There are four general categories used to define these shapes: tufted, mounded, upright and arching.



Arching      Upright      Tufted      Mounded

When deciding to use ornamental grasses on your golf course or landscape, it is important to be aware of these guidelines to simplify the process. First, choose a grass that is right for your climate. Usually, all ornamental books will provide a plant hardiness zone map and may include specific local conditions. The USDA categorizes the Chicago area and northern two-thirds of Illinois as zone 5, with an annual minimum temperature of minus 10 to 20 degrees F.

Secondly, the grass should fit in the landscape design — with the correct size, shape and color. Make sure the plant blends in or complements the other plants. It is best that it doesn't overpower the rest of the design. Additionally, consider the growth habit of the grass plant. If it is a runner with invasive tendencies, be sure to confine it with physical barriers or borders. Also, know the shape of the grass. Is it tufted, mounded, upright or arching? You don't want it plant pampas grass near a walkway, where it may eventually block the walkway.

The following is a small list of ornamental grasses that are suited for zone 5. There are many varieties with several shapes, sizes and colors that can add beauty to a landscape. Check with your local nursery about ornamental grasses or you can purchase from mail-order sources.

- A. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus' — Maidengrass, 5-6 ft., arching form
- B. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder' — Silver feather maidengrass, 5-6 ft., arching form
- C. *Miscanthus oligostachys* — Small Japanese silver grass, 3-4 ft., showy flowers
- D. *Pennisetum alopecuroides* — Fountain grass, 2-3 ft., tolerates light shade
- E. *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Moundry' — Black flowering pennisetum, 18-26 inches, mounded form
- F. *Agropyron magellanicum* — Blue wheat grass, 1-1.5 ft., mounded form
- G. *Calamagrostis acutiflora* — Feather reed grass, 2-4 ft., arching form
- H. *Cortaderia selloana* 'Pumila' — Dwarf pampas grass, 4-6 ft.
- I. *Erianthus ravennae* — Blue grass, hardy pampas grass, 4-5 ft. and as wide, excellent along water.
- J. *Festuca cinerea* — Blue fescue, sheep's fescue, 4-18 inches in tufts, many varieties
- K. *Glyceria maxima* — Variegated manna grass, 2-4 ft., grows well in moist soil or shallow water in full sun
- L. *Imperata cylindrica* — Japanese bloodgrass, 1-1.5 ft., prefers moist soil, can become an aggressive spreader

Credit: The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses,  
John Greenlee