



Grasses Can Be Beautiful Too

By Tom Schwab, Manager
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Although the Noer Facility does research on turfgrass and turfgrass systems, our latest plots that were installed will investigate another type of grass. We just planted three beds of ornamental grasses.

Ornamental grasses are a group of plants from the grass (Graminae) family and from closely related families including sedges (Cyperaceae), rushes (Juncaceae) and others. Non-grasses are often included in this group because of the general nature of the term ornamental grass. Ornamental grasses' other feature is obviously that they are ornamental or showy in the landscape. In that sense, turfgrass could be considered the most popular of all ornamental grasses. Golf course managers use turfgrass to create extremely beautiful settings!

Our study will be looking at more true ornamental grasses which are showy grass and grasslike plants as they are permitted to mature, flower, and exhibit their natural features. Their decorative features allow them to be

used in flower beds, mass plantings, or as unique specimen plants by themselves.

Ornamental grasses have always been interesting to me, but I thought only a few did well in our climate. A recent six year winter hardiness study at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum found 85 out of the 165 ornamental grasses studied can be grown successfully in USDA Zone 4. That zone covers all but the northern 1/5 of Wisconsin. I also hope to get some of these ornamental grasses studied at one of our far northern UW Ag Research Stations to investigate survival in Zone 3. If there is a superintendent near the Minocqua or Spooner stations who would be willing to help with this study, please call me at 608-845-6536.

The uses of ornamental grasses are endless. They can be used singularly or in combination in mass plantings. For example, the grasses in a prairie are ornamental grasses. Some ornamental grasses can grow to be 8 feet tall. Those taller ones can be used as

specimen plants to achieve some diversity, where you might otherwise use small trees. A flower bed is not complete without the use of some grasses. They can either soften a garden or make it more dynamic with their colors of blue, yellow, bronze and red as well as variegated white and yellow.

The University of Minnesota reported on ornamental grasses' other desirable traits. They reported very few insect or disease problems and low nutrient requirements. Another feature reported was multiple season interest with their foliage, flowers, and texture. They grow fast. Some large plants grow 5 to 8 feet tall by the second year. Lastly reported was their movement in the wind which provides interesting sound and beauty.

We began planting the three demonstration areas of ornamental grasses at the Noer Facility in July, 1995. These plants came from another demonstration plot that was started at the Noer Facility in 1994. In August, 1995 we planted an additional group of nursery stock ornamental grasses. These were



Starting at the foreground and moving away from there are golden-edged prairie cord grass fountain grass, ribbon grass and Foerster's feather reed grass. This planting is at the NOER Facility.



The E.B. Fred house is the focus of the Allen Centennial Gardens on the UW-Madison campus. The house, formerly the home of Dr. Fred who was CALS dean and UW president, is now headquarters for the ARS of the UW-Madison. It is worth a trip to see and tour and enjoy and learn.

donated by C/R Stephenson Company, Madison, Wisconsin. Eventually the areas will comprise 25 different genera and over 100 different varieties of ornamental grasses. There are plans to install two other demonstrations at the Noer Facility in the future to feature ornamental grasses that need deep rich soil and ones that thrive in wet soils.

The strategy we used in the design of the Noer demonstration was to place the plants in their natural settings: shade loving plants were placed in the shade, dry loving plants in dry, etc. Most of the plants also grow in groups naturally so we placed most varieties in groups of three. All of the plants were mulched with 3" of shredded oak bark. We also planted them in shallow silt loam soil that was not modified with amendments.

The demonstration includes commonly used ornamental grasses for our climate and less common ones to evaluate their performance. We will be observing hardiness, desirable features, and negative features. Desirable features on shape, size, and color of flowers and foliage will be observed. A negative feature may be invasiveness, depending on whether you want to contain the plant or let it spread. Plants can be invasive with aggressive rhizomes and stolons or by being prolific self-sowing seeders. Invasive plants may have to be contained with either physical barriers or with vigilant weeding. John Greenlee, the author of *The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses* reports that only a small percentage of these grasses are potentially weedy.

The University of Minnesota publication states that for northern climates, the best time to plant ornamental grasses is in the spring. This time frame leaves you plenty of time to read up on how to best incorporate a planting for yourself next spring. Two excellent resources that I'm using to learn



The O.N. Allen Centennial Gardens on the UW-Madison campus include this fabulous and graceful ornamental grass garden.



Use this photo of the NOER Facility as a reference, as the ornamental grass planting in the foreground matures in the years ahead.

about ornamental grasses are *The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses* by John Greenlee and the University of Minnesota publication *Ornamental Grasses for Cold Climates* by M. Hochenberry Meyer, D.B. White and H. Pellett. These publications have information on every aspect of using ornamental grasses. You will definitely want to get both before you start using

ornamental grasses. We're also hoping that the new demonstration at the Noer Facility will give you more confidence and information to use a greater variety of these plants in your landscapes. Then the next time it gets to be the middle of a tough summer and you're starting to hate grass you can be reminded that grasses are beautiful too. ♣



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