

Ornamental grasses!



Fireworks in the landscape

To offset the normal horizontal look of a landscape, try ornamental grasses. Some grow to 12 feet high and most are low maintenance.

■ Ornamental grasses are an attractive, low-maintenance alternative to annual and perennial flower beds that are becoming more popular throughout the green industry, according to James Snyder, president of Riverbend Nursery, Reiner, Va.

Golf course superintendents are using ornamental grasses to provide a vertical beauty to their courses, and landscapers are finding that they are extremely popular among homeowners.

"They come in a whole array of colors and textures," says Snyder. "They have a minimal fertilizer requirement, but you do need to apply some fertilizer at establishment. Ninety percent are literally care-free; you just cut them down in February."

Although a few species are big-leaved and bold, notes a booklet from Longwood Gardens, most have a uniquely fine-textured

foliage that provides stunning contrast to broad-leaved landscape elements. They are particularly effective, says the booklet, when backlit by the sun.

Snyder notes that ornamental grasses exhibit two growth patterns: most are clump-type, but some others are spreading types. The clump-forming grasses, Snyder observes, do not aggressively spread; spreading types can colonize large areas.

Most grasses are best purchased in spring before they attain much growth, Longwood Gardens claims. Although retail garden centers are offering an increasing selection of container-grown ornamental grasses, many of the newer or rarer cultivars are only available through mail-order nurseries. Table 1 provides a list of some popular ornamental grasses, but be sure to check with your supplier or nursery to make sure you're getting what you want.

If the plants are container-grown, Longwood Gardens recommends that you "knock off some of the soil mix and loosen up the roots to encourage establishment into your soil. Field-grown plants, when available, are usually in heavier soils and may establish more readily."

Most ornamental grasses flower from July through November in colors ranging from white through pink and purple. Landscape managers who have tried them in golf course, commercial and home landscape settings are sold on them.

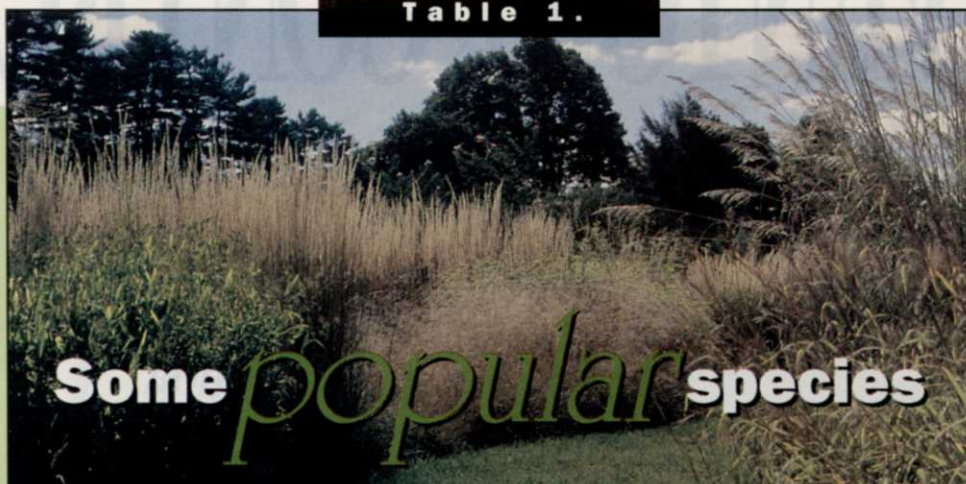


Snyder: Most ornamental grasses are 'literally care-free.'

Here are Riverbend Nursery's planting recommendations:

Site preparation: Remove all grass and weeds from seedbed, using either two
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Table 1.



Common name	Scientific name	Size	Color
Giant miscanthus	<i>Miscanthus 'Giganteus'</i>	G	orange
Feather-reedgrass	<i>Calamagrostis epigeios</i>	M-L	n/a
Wild oats	<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	M	green/gold
Ribbongrass	<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i>	M	white
Hakonegrass	<i>Hacakonechloa macra</i>	M	orange
Japanese bloodgrass	<i>Imperata cylindrica</i>	M	bright red
Blue switchgrass	<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	L	blue/gray
Maidengrass	<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	G	copper
Ravennagrass	<i>Erianthus ravenae</i>	G	blue/gray
Silver plumegrass	<i>Erianthus alopecuroides</i>	M	silver
Hardy Oriental fountain	<i>Pennisetum orientale</i>	M	white/pink

Key to size abbreviations:

M=medium (1-3 feet); L=large (3-6 feet); G=giant (6+ feet).

Sources: "Oriental Grasses at Longwood Gardens" and Riverbend Nursery

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applications of a broad-range herbicide or sterilizing the soil with a sterilant.

Amend the soil if necessary. In a very heavy clay soil, in a sandy loam topsoil or sand. In a lighter soil but one with little organic material, peat moss is recommended.

Incorporate a low nitrogen or balanced fertilizer into the rootzone. Slow-release fertilizers can also be used, but at reduced rates when incorporated into the soil.

Spacing: Distance between plants is based on the size of the plants, the expected growth rate and the budget. See Table 2 for general spacing recommendations.

Mulching: Use a layer 2-3 inches thick the first year, applying additional as the original mulch decomposes. Mulches deter weeds, retain moisture and prevent the

plants from heaving during the first winter.

Herbicides: Use a pre-emergent at the time of planting; post-emergents can be sprayed around the base of many varieties. Pre-emergents help prevent germination of unwanted weeds, and post-emergents control weeds and unwanted other grasses that may compete with ornamental grasses for nutrients and/or spoil the appearance of the bed. Read and follow all label directions.

—*"Ornamental Grasses at Longwood Gardens," compiled by Rick Darke and edited by Betsey Ney (1993), is a 32-page booklet available for \$2.50 from Longwood Gardens, P.O. Box 501, Kennett Square, PA 19348.*

Table 2.

Plant spacing

Spacing	Plants/sq.ft.
8" centers	2.25
10" centers	1.44
12" centers	1.00
15" centers	.64
18" centers	.44
24" centers	.25
36" centers	.12

Source: Riverbend Nursery