



ORNAMENTAL GRASSES FOR NORTH CAROLINA

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Ornamental grasses are becoming quite popular for North Carolina landscapes. Designers and gardeners realize the fine accent and architectural effect this group of plants contributes to a garden. As one applies the principles of good design – repetition, variety, balance, emphasis, sequence, and scale – along with the design qualities of color, texture, line and form, one appreciates the many uses and functions of ornamental grasses. (The term “ornamental grass” is really a catch-all term used to describe all grasslike plants. These would include sedges, reeds, rushes, and a wide host of others.)

Most ornamental grasses would be described as having graceful, arching foliage, several species being variegated. Seasonal interest is accomplished from spring “green-up” through the summer, with rich autumn colors in the fall and winter. The flower plumes on several species can be spectacular, giving interest for outdoor scale or dried and used indoors.

Ornamental grasses are highly resistant to insect and disease problems, tolerant to heat and drought, and require little or no pruning. Two important requirements are full sun and well-drained soil. Ornamental grass species grow to various sizes, some growing to 10 to 15 feet while others are considered dwarf plants used as ground covers. Ornamental

grasses have several uses as functional landscape plants. When combined with a few evergreen shrubs, Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*), Zebragrass (*Miscanthus sinensis zebrinus*), or Feather Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis cutiflora stricta*) can create an excellent screen for privacy.

Most ornamental grasses can stand alone when used as an accent plant or focal point, especially when plumes of several species are abundant.

Blue Fescue (*Festuca ovina glauca*) with its blue-green foliage and fine texture is excellent as a ground cover in a small area. A favorite for eastern North Carolina on slopes or eroded areas is Weeping Lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*).

The following is a listing of several grasses with a brief description of form and habit:

Briza Media (Quaking Grass) – Grows 2 to 3 feet tall, spring bloomer, clump type best in full sun, hardy to zone 4.

Calamagrostis cutiflora stricta (Feather Reed Grass) – Grows 4 to 5 feet tall, used in small gardens, blooms late June through September, grows in full sun, hardy zones 5 through 7.

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Carex glauca (Blue Gray Sedge) – Excellent compact ground cover grows to 10 inches without clipping.

Carex pendula (Sedge) – Mounded-clump type ornamental grass best used as a ground cover. Plant 12 to 15 inches on center either as a mass planting or as a border.

Cortaderia selloana (Pampas Grass) – A native of Argentina and southern Brazil, Pampas grass was introduced to the United States in 1848. This showy reed-like perennial plant belongs to the grass family, Graminaea. Pampas grass is hardy throughout North Carolina except in the highest mountain elevations (Zone 6). Pampas grass is damaged all across the state by single digit temperatures.

Plants grow upright in clumps of dense tufts with numerous long, narrow strap-like leaves. Pampas grass often reaches 20 feet in height. When viewed from a distance, the plant has a fountain-like appearance.

Large, showy 2- to 3-foot silvery white flower plumes are borne on long stems which tower above the mounded leaf mass. These appear in late summer and early autumn.

Pampas grass can grow on a wide variety of soils. For best results plant in a well-drained area in full sun.

Usually, fertilizing the nearby lawn provides sufficient supplemental food for Pampas grass. If established plants appear to need fertilizer, apply approximately one cup per foot of clump diameter. Use a complete fertilizer (as 8-8-8 or 10-10-10) in early spring.

Pampas grass is most effective when grown as a single specimen; however, several plants can be grouped or clustered together for a background accent. Pampas grass is very effective when “pulled forward” into a sunny spot in front of a fence or hedge. Landscape-wise, Pampas grass is thought of as a plant which is most effective when seen from a distance where one can view the handsome fountain-like profile of the plant. There is a dramatic accent to the landscape when Pampas grass comes into bloom, with its silvery-white plumes appearing above the green mound of foliage. Pampas grass is considered to be a

good choice in the landscape planting at grounds of buildings of contemporary, “modern” style.

Pampas grass usually is increased by division of old plant clumps during the month of March. Dig and divide by use of such as a sharp shovel or even a saw. Replant shortly thereafter in the ground or in large pots or cans.

Established plants produce small “daughter” plants at the edge of the “mother” clump. Dig these in March. Female plants produce more showy plumes than male plants; therefore, most plants purchased from nurseries are female. Plants can also be easily produced from seed; however, seeds are often not produced due to the absence of a male plant.

Flower plumes can be dried for overwinter decorations. Cut when fully developed in the fall. Place stems in a container of sand, crushed chickenwire or biddie mesh to dry indoors.

Cortaderia selloana Rendatleri (Pink Pampas Grass) – A very showy pampas grass with slender 24-inch leaves and silvery-rose flower plumes borne from late July through October.

Deschampsia caespitosa Bronzeschleier (Bronze Fairy Wand Grass) – Evergreen, graceful grass, grows 2 feet tall.

Eriathus ravennae (Plume Grass) – Grows 8 to 12 feet tall and is hardy all across North Carolina. (Often referred to as hardy pampas grass.) Plume grass has a silvery-beige color which becomes orange-brown in the fall.

Festuca ovina glauca (Dwarf Blue Fescue or Sheep’s Fescue) – One of the favorite grasses for a ground cover. This tufted grass can be used all across North Carolina and is especially useful in small-garden settings. Usually planted on 12-inch centers and allowed to eventually grow together. Easily propagated by division.

Helectotrichon sempervirens (Blue Oat Grass) – Grows to 2 feet tall, intense silver blue foliage, hardy to zone 4.

Imperata cylindrica (Red Baron Japanese Blood Grass) – Grows 12 to 18 inches tall, beautiful cranberry colored foliage in summer and fall, hardy to zone 7.

Miscanthus sinensis (Eulalia Grass) – One of the most popular ornamental grasses throughout the south. Is completely hardy all across North Carolina. Many cultivars exist with specific growth habits and landscape characteristics. This grass can easily reach heights of 10 feet. The highly ornamental fruit stalks are borne late in the summer.

Gracillimus (Maiden Grass) – Narrow leaves, smaller in habit.

Silberfeder (Silver Feather Grass) – Grows 6 to 9 feet tall, clumping grass with silver plumes. Hardy to zone 6.

Zebrinus (Zebra Grass) – Leaves banded with yellow.

Molina caerulea variegata (Variegated Purple Moor Grass) – An excellent ornamental grass because of the narrow arching 2-foot-long leaves which are slightly purple with stripes of cream. Lasts well into the fall season and is hardy all across North Carolina.

Panicum virgatum (Switch Grass) – The upright growth habit which becomes bright yellow in the fall is why this ornamental grass is so popular. Will grow to a height of 4 to 6 feet in a wide variety of soils and drainage.

Panicum virgatum Haense Herms (Red Switch Grass) – Grows 3 to 4 feet tall, hardy to zone 5. Spectacular summer flowers, followed by brilliant orange fall color.

Pennisetum alopecuroides (Fountain Grass) – This ornamental grass is valued for its colorful fruit heads. Very graceful, arching 1/8 inch-wide foliage is an excellent ornamental grass for any garden. Fountain grass is hardy through Zone 7 and will grow to about 4 feet tall.

Phalaris arundinacea picta (Ribbon Grass) – This grass is valued because of its striped green and white leaves. Will reach a height of 2 to 4 feet and hardy all across North Carolina. Resembles a short bamboo, and spreads rapidly by underground stolons. Can become a problem if allowed to grow uncontrolled, but can be cut back to ground several times per year.

Stipa gigantea (Giant Feather Grass) – This native grass of Spain will grow to 6 feet tall. The large flower heads first appear as purple on green, then changing to a bright yellow. Hardy to Zone 5.

Chasmanthium latifolium (Northern Sea Oats) – An excellent grass for mass planting or as a specimen plant. Spreads by underground creeping rhizomes. Grows to 2 to 5 feet with rich, green color during spring and summer. Dries during fall and dies to ground during winter. Seedpods are excellent in dried arrangements.

Most ornamental grasses are being grown in containers by nurserymen. The larger growing plants are usually sold in 3-gallon containers while the groundcover smaller growing grasses are usually sold in a 1-gallon container. The grasses listed have specific hardiness limitations and should not be used beyond the recommended zones. Year-round planting can be accomplished in all areas of North Carolina exception the upper mountain elevations, which would be best planted in spring and summer.

Several of the grasses are considered deciduous and can be pruned back in mid-winter (January to February) when they are completely dormant. This is best accomplished with pruning shears or electric hedge clippers. The new growth will begin to appear in late spring when fertilizer can be applied. General recommendations would include 8-8-8 or 10-10-10. For clump type grasses, use 1 to 1½ cups per established plant. For ground cover type plantings use 2 to 3 lbs of fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. of bed area.