

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Few people think of grasses as plants for the garden. Instead, grass is considered the invader that needs to be dug out. More and more folks, however, are beginning to discover that some grasses make handsome additions to home gardens and landscapes.

Ornamental grasses are grown primarily for their handsome seed heads or plumes, or their foliage. Some come with blue-gray leaves, others are striped, several have autumn colors, and a few are even semi-evergreen in Michigan. Seed heads range from a few inches in size to over a foot in length. Colors range from brown to pink.

Ornamental grasses can be used in many ways -- in perennial gardens, as ground covers, in naturalized areas, alongside ponds and even as temporary screens. When using grasses among shrubs, consider height, form and season variation. Growth habit is also a consideration as many grasses such as ribbon grass spread rampantly, whereas others mind their manners and stay in one place. Some grasses reach only a few inches tall, whereas others top 8 feet.

Ornamental grasses rarely require special care. They have few insect or disease problems, and most will thrive with just one yearly fertilization. In annual borders, the grasses used are usually short-lived varieties that are grown mostly for use as cut dried flowers or cut for their seed heads. Quaking grasses is a good example of this type.

Treat annual grasses much as you would annual flowers, starting them fresh from seed each year and keeping the seed heads picked so they do not go to seed in the garden, becoming a weed.

Perennial grasses are usually purchased as started plants but can be started from seed if you can wait 3-5 years for mature plants. In late winter or early spring, cut back your perennial grass clumps to encourage vigorous growth in the spring. If the plant has been in the same spot for years and is growing only from the outer edges, it is time to divide it.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

https://www.canr.msu.edu/lawn_garden/

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach/>