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Texture and colors of ornamental grasses pack a visual wallop

BY MARY VINNEDGE

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES WORK OVERTIME in landscapes. They retain their dramatic color and texture through three seasons of interest, and one of the seasons is ... TAH-DAH ... winter. In addition, these deer-resistant plants need minimal care, and many will return reliably for years.

John D. Butler, president of Arapahoe Landscape Contractors Inc. in Allendale, appreciates all those qualities

and adds that ornamental grasses are “an excellent complement to water features or pools.”

Karen Hertzog, landscape designer for Hertzog Associates Ltd. in Stockton, praises their grace as well as their flexibility in function: as specimen plants, in broad swaths, and at various locations in borders. Spring is their least-showy season, she says.

With a breeze, *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Strictus’ and *M. sinensis* ‘Variegatus’ come alive with movement. Design by Cording Landscape Design.

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Beth Pellegrini, a designer with Cording Landscape Design in Towaco, is almost poetic in describing ornamental grasses. “The breeze moves through them, causing motion and sound, making the gardens come alive. Also, they give variety in form, color, and texture, and can be mixed with other plants to make interesting plant combinations.”

If these attributes seem tempting, how do you start?

Yellow-and-green striped *Hakonechloa macra* ‘Aureola’ brightens the way to a springhouse on an old farmstead in Flemington. Design by Hertzog Associates Ltd.

Getting Grounded

Ideal planting times for perennial grasses are spring into early summer, so now is the time to decide what and where to plant. To use ornamental grasses as a seasonal planting, install them anytime, Butler adds.

Ornamental grasses are often considered casual, but Butler believes they have a place in formal designs. “They



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can add a lot of texture and interest to most gardens, especially with the [many] varieties out there.” They can be spiky to gently draped, in greens, reds, purples, yellows, and variegated.

Hertzog says they work well in symmetric pairs or as a specimen — “a punctuation” — in a formal landscape. If used in drifts, they need to be in a more casual setting, she says.

Size is critical to siting. Pay attention to the mature sizes on tags, Butler says. “I’ve seen a lot of ‘cute little grasses’ end up being big monsters. Also plant when they are fully up [and] bloomed for placement.”

Heights range from *Ophiopogon planiscapus* ‘Nigrescens’, black mondo grass, at 6 to 10 inches, to pampas grass at 12 feet.

Ornamental grass choices include clumping and running types. “Spreading types like *phalaris* [ribbon grass] have their place, Butler says, “but they need to be constantly split and maintained.” Instead, he prefers clumping types used in groups of three, five, seven, and so on.

Top row, from left: Ornamental grasses maintain their beauty in fall. Here, the fine texture of *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Morning Light’ and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’ contrasts with the bolder textures of adjacent plantings such as yellow mums. Design by Cording Landscape Design. • *Phalaris arundinacea* ‘Strawberries & Cream’, or ribbon grass, isn’t technically classified as a grass, but it’s used in landscaping and sold as a grass. It’s a running type that can become invasive. • Festival grass, a cordyline species, is treated as an annual in New Jersey. It has a fluid form that works in containers as well as landscape beds. Because of its cascading habit, the plant has a low profile, though the blades can be 3 feet in length. **Second row, from left:** The gracefully drooping *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Variegatus’ and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’ complement the waterfall. Design by Cording Landscape Design. • *Pennisetum x advena* ‘Rubrum’ (formerly *Pennisetum setaceum* “Rubrum”), a.k.a. purple fountain grass, can take some shade. • Zebra grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Zebrinus’), named for its striped foliage, makes an accent or hedge, says John D. Butler of Arapahoe Landscape Contractors Inc. It’s 6 to 8 feet tall at maturity. • *Carex flagellifera* ‘Toffee Twist’ has fine-textured, bronzy foliage. It’s hardy to about 5 degrees and will grow 18 to 24 inches tall. **Third row, from left:** Oriental fountain grass (*Pennisetum orientale*) peaks at about 1 foot in height with an abundance of wispy, creamy flowers. Easily grown from seed, it’s great in containers or landscape beds. • At 3 to 4 feet tall, purple fountain grass is stately and graceful at the back of a border planting. • The straw-colored wisps in this wreath are dried *Miscanthus* sp. Flowers. • Purple fountain grass brings riveting reds to the landscape. Design by Cording Landscape Design.



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Top row, from left: Near a Stockton pool are *Pennisetum alopecuroides* (right foreground); *Pennisetum x advena* 'Rubrum', formerly *P. setaceum* 'Rubrum' (left foreground); and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' (background center). Design by Hertzog Associates Ltd. • A grouping of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus' provides a backdrop and seclusion for a stone bench looking onto a pond. Design by Cording Landscape Design. **Second row, from left:** *Phalaris*, or ribbon grass, puts a bright halo atop a waterfall. Plant ribbon grass with care: It's great for stopping erosion on a slope but can be invasive. • Blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) reaches 18 to 24 inches tall and can take some shade. • *Pennisetum glaucum* 'Purple Majesty', or ornamental millet, grows easily from seed. The seed heads are 8 to 12 inches long on plants about 3 to 4 feet tall. Treat it as an annual. **Third row, from left:** *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio' should not be cut back until spring; the foliage protects the crowns while the dried seed heads provide winter interest. • Black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus*) likes shade. It's petite at 6 to 12 inches.

Favorite Types

John D. Butler of Arapahoe Landscape Contractors Inc., Karen Hertzog of Hertzog Associates Ltd., and Beth Pellegrini of Cording Landscape Design frequently use ornamental grasses in their designs. Each offers colorful favorites, including:

- *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola'. Hertzog describes it as extremely graceful, with yellow-and-green-striped leaves that bring out the colors of other plants. "It really lights up a dark space."
- *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio', which peaks at 4 feet. It has gray-green foliage with flowers of fluorescent white, Hertzog says.
- *Molinia caerulea*, which has a transparent quality (one variety is named 'Transparent'). Hertzog says it blends well with other perennials, adding lightness throughout a garden. The grass is about a foot tall, but the flower spikes can be 6 to 8 feet. He says this grass is sold mostly to the trade.
- *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' (pronounced ham•lin). It's bright green with fluffy off-white flowers and clumps 2 to 3 feet tall.
- Black or blue mondo grass (*ophiopogon* cultivars). Butler likes to use these 6- to 12-inch plants as bed edging.
- Yellow varieties of low-growing *Carex*. Pellegrini likes the vivid *Carex elata* 'Bowles Golden', an upright grower about 2 feet tall. It's also called *C. elata* 'Aurea'.
- Blood grass, or *Imperata cylindrica* var. *koenigii* 'Red Baron'. This vivid red grass (36 to 54 inches) can freeze out in New Jersey, Butler says, so plant it in a protected area in sun.
- Variegated grasses. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Cosmopolitan', 6 to 8 feet, is a Pellegrini pick. Butler mentions zebra grass (*M. sinensis* 'Zebrinus') as an accent or hedge to 8 feet. To go shorter: *Carex morrowii* 'Variegata', variegated sedge grass, 18 inches high.
- *Helictotrichon sempervirens*, a.k.a. blue oat grass (30 inches). It has a fine texture.
- *Pennisetum x advena* 'Rubrum'. It's a burr-gundy 4-footer with fuzzy flowers.

— Mary Vinnedge

Pellegrini generally avoids the running types such as bamboos, ribbon grass, and lyme grass. "The only time you would want to use that type is in erosion control," she says.

Tall grasses — *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus', for instance — make a nice backdrop to perennials such as 'Autumn Joy' sedum and 'Big Sky Surprise' echinacea. "The fine texture of the grass contrasts well with the bold texture of those perennials," Pellegrini says. "Some smaller grasses make a great front-of-the-bed-border [planting], such as a mass of 'Powder Blue' fescue in front of 'Royal Purple' smoke bush. I love to use *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' to border a shady garden. Its bright yellow-chartreuse color brightens the border along a shady path."

Care & Feeding

Ornamental grasses are not demanding. Most need full sun; some tolerate shade. Consult plant tags or a gardening reference to find out. They do not need rich soil or fertilizer. "Keep it a little lean," Hertzog says. She recommends soil prepared to a depth of 18 inches — "break up any hardpan" — with organic matter tilled in before planting.

Grasses often need extra water their first growing season to become established, Pellegrini says, but provide good drainage.

In winter, the drying seed heads and foliage still deserve a place in the landscape. "Enjoy them through the winter," Hertzog says. "The seed heads contrast with browns and grays in the winter garden and handle snow well. Then you can cut them down in March."

Year to year, some may need attention. "The bigger varieties tend to die in their centers," Hertzog says. "Replant the pieces from the edges in early spring."

With minimal care, the perennials become a permanent part of the landscape, Butler says. ☐

Mary Vinnedge is a gardener and a freelance writer. Her website is www.EditorForRent.com.

For More Information

Helpful sources on ornamental grasses include:

- *Timber Press Pocket Guide to Ornamental Grasses* by Rick Darke
- www.davesgarden.com
- www.provenwinners.com

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