

Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses can be wonderful additions to a home landscape. They provide the perfect bridge between a planned residential landscape and the larger prairie surrounding Kansas communities. Grasses are easy care plants adapted to both prairie soils and Midwest climate. They do well with natural rainfall and require little or no watering. Ornamental grasses also provide exciting texture, color, and form that is not easily replicated by other plants.

Grasses are categorized as either cool or warm season species. The primary growth period for cool season grasses begins in late winter to early spring when moist conditions and cooler soil and air temperatures abound. They flower in late spring to early summer. Cool season grasses can go dormant during the hot, dry summers typical of Kansas. As autumn approaches, moisture levels rise and air temperatures fall. Cool season grasses can go through another growth spurt before they turn brown and enter winter dormancy. Many cool season grasses stay upright and have interesting colors throughout the winter.

Warm season grasses emerge from winter dormancy later in the spring than cool season grasses. Most growth occurs during warm summer months. Ideal soil temperature for warm season grasses is between 70 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Ideal air temperature is between 80 and 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Plants flower in late summer. Warm season grasses stop growing when the weather turns colder mid-fall, and plants go dormant for the winter. Winter dormancy is when many warm season grasses exhibit beautiful autumn colors.

One way to distinguish cool season from warm season grasses is to observe when the plant is actively growing and when it blooms. Cool season grasses begin to grow in cooler temperatures and flower earlier in the summer. Warm season grasses begin to grow later in the spring when temperatures rise, and they flower later in the summer.

Planning

As you think about how to use ornamental grasses in your landscape, be creative. Grasses can be used for a wide variety of purposes. Tall and medium-sized grasses make wonderful screens, windbreaks, and backdrops for other plantings, or they can accent features within the landscape. Ornamental grasses are great for creating privacy or walls in outdoor spaces, or as a pleasing natural screen to block an undesirable view.

Smaller grass varieties can be combined with flowers, used as mass plantings, or in small groupings. They can be planted side-by-side in a single row or offset in a double row to outline planting beds.

Planting Time

When planting ornamental grass, it is helpful to know whether it is a cool or warm season grass. This information enables you to plant and divide grass during the time for optimal success.

Cool Season

Because the optimal growth periods for cool season grasses are both late winter to early spring and again in the fall, these are the best times to plant and divide cool season grasses. Plant grasses early in spring after the risk of frost has passed and when new growth begins to show on the plant. This is March to April for most of Kansas, which allows time for the plant to become established before summer heat arrives. Likewise, plant cool season grasses past the heat of the summer but early enough in the fall that the grasses can become established before winter arrives, usually September. Planting cool season grasses during their summer dormancy will place undo stress on the plant. Do not plant or dig and divide cool season grasses in winter or summer.

Warm Season

The best time to plant warm season grasses is while they are actively growing and long before they begin to bloom. For Kansas, this is late spring, May to early June. This should give the plant enough time to become established before the heat and drought of summer arrives. Grasses can be planted during the summer but will need to be watered well. Planting warm season grasses in late fall can be risky. Late fall plantings may not develop adequate root growth before going into winter dormancy. Then it becomes difficult for the plant to handle the stresses of cold temperatures and frozen soils.

Plant Spacing and Depth

Plant the grass so the surface of the soil in the pot is level with the ground or slightly higher than existing ground. Do not plant them too low. The distance between plants depends on the style you are trying to achieve. If you want a screen, plant grasses closer. If you want a screen with some view between the plants, plant a little farther apart.

The general rule of thumb is to space plants at a width equal to their eventual height. For example, if the eventual height of the grass is 36 inches, space them 36 inches apart (measured from the center of the base of each plant).

Water grass well to settle the soil and continue watering as needed until the plant is well established. New plants require extra care. Once established, normal rainfall should fulfill the water requirements of the ornamental grass.

Care

Grasses are easy to maintain in the landscape. The most important thing is to cut back the foliage each year. In Kansas, the best time to do this is late winter to early spring (February to March) before new growth starts to show. Trim to within 6 to 8 inches above the ground.

Grasses also need to be divided every so often. Depending on their growth rate and habit, this may be every three to five years. A good indicator is when the center of the plant begins to die out. Divide ornamental grasses when the plants are dormant, which is early spring for warm and cool season grasses. Cool season grasses also can be dug and divided in the fall.

The Kansas Healthy Yards and Communities program has four videos demonstrating proper care and maintenance

and the beauty of ornamental grasses. Search for them at www.KansasGreenYards.org. Or find them here:

Pruning Ornamental Grass: <http://goo.gl/orheh>

Dividing Ornamental Grass: <http://goo.gl/9btpQ>

Ornamental Grass Have Interesting Seed Heads: <http://goo.gl/ajixK>

Ornamental Grasses Come in Lots of Shapes and Textures: <http://goo.gl/66gEF>

Visit www.KSUTurf.org to find full color pictures, records of growth, and descriptions of each variety. Find the Ornamental Grasses link within the list of publications in the homeowner's section under the Publications and Resources tab at [KSUTurf.org](http://www.KSUTurf.org). You will find pictures of the best performing grasses on the Prairie Bloom list at www.prairiestarflowers.com.

Ornamental grasses are not only water wise, but they provide both food and shelter for wildlife. The possibilities are endless for what you can achieve with ornamental grasses. There is an ornamental grass to suit any spot in your landscape. Keep in mind that both cool season and warm season grasses work in the Kansas climate. Experiment with them and enjoy the beauty they can bring to your yard.

Ornamental Grasses

Genus Species	Common Name	Cultivar	Flower	Planting Location	Height to Top of Foliage	Height to Top of Flower	Plant Width	Cool Season/ Warm Season Grass	Week of 1st Bloom
<i>Arundo donax</i>	Variegated Giant Reed Grass	Variegata	Tan	Sun	13'	14'	7'	Warm	31
<i>Calamagrostis x acutiflora</i>	Feather Reed Grass	Avalanche	Tan	Sun	18"	38"	21"	Cool	23
<i>Calamagrostis x acutiflora</i>	Feather Reed Grass	Karl Foerster	Tan	Sun	24"	56"	20"	Cool	23
<i>Calamagrostis x acutiflora</i>	Feather Reed Grass	Overdam	Pink to tan	Sun	25"	43"	26"	Cool	23
<i>Eragrostis elliotii</i>	Lovegrass	Wind Dancer	Tan	Sun	40"	53"	30"	Warm	26
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Japanese Silver Grass	Adagio	Reddish to tan	Sun	45"	56"	62"	Warm	32
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Maiden Grass	Graziella	White	Sun	43"	72"	39"	Warm	32
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Maiden Grass	Little Kitten	Tan	Sun	42"	40"	54"	Warm	32
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Maiden Grass	Little Zebra	Tan	Sun	51"	51"	72"	Warm	36
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Maiden Grass	Malepartus	Purple pink turning silver	Sun	39"	73"	36"	Warm	34
<i>Miscanthus sinensis var. condensatus</i>	Maiden Grass	Cabaret	Pinkish white	Sun	63"	87"	48"	Warm	33
<i>Molinia arundinacea</i>	Purple Moor Grass	Skyracer	Purple to tan	Sun	29"	78"	28"	Cool	25
<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	Switchgrass	Cloud Nine	Tan	Sun	78"	93"	90"	Warm	31
<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	Switchgrass	Dallas Blues	Pink	Sun	78"	80"	78"	Warm	32
<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	Switchgrass	Northwind	Tan	Sun	51"	60"	30"	Warm	31
<i>Pennisetum orientale</i>	Oriental Fountain Grass	Karley Rose	Pink	Sun	36"	44"	59"	Warm	25
<i>Saccharum ravennae</i>	Hardy pampas grass		Tan	Sun	64"	12'4"	63"	Warm	33
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	Little Bluestem		Tan	Sun	16"	30"	14"	Warm	32
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Prairie Dropseed		Tan	Sun	15"	38"	16"	Warm	28

For more information, visit our website at www.KSUTurf.org. You will find full color pictures, records of growth, and descriptions of each variety within the list of publications in the Homeowner's section under the Publications and Resources tab.

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