

# Ornamental Grasses

With the popularity of ornamental grasses and their use in the landscape, it is a good idea to understand how these plants grow. Some grasses will start to grow in early spring when temperatures are still cool and others will wait until the soil is warm and temperatures are more stable.

**Cool season grasses** will start to grow early in the spring and may even remain semi-evergreen over the winter. They will do better and have better foliage when temperatures are cool or if they are given sufficient water during drought periods. They may require more frequent division to keep them healthy and vigorous. For the ones that remain semi-evergreen, you should only cut off the brown or winter injured foliage in the spring. Some of the popular cool season grasses include Fescues, Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon*), Tufted Hair Grass (*Deschampsia*), and Autumn Moor Grass (*Sesleria*).

**Warm season grasses** will do better during warmer times of the year and remain looking good when temperatures are high and moisture is limited. The previous season's growth usually browns out in the fall necessitating cutting back of plants to about 4 to 5 inches in the spring. They do not require frequent division. Some warm season grasses include Northern Sea Oats (*Chasmanthium*), Japanese Silver Grass (*Miscanthus spp.*), Hardy Pampas Grass (*Erianthus*), Perennial Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum*), and Switch Grass (*Panicum*).

Advantages of ornamental grasses are many: they can grow in poor soil and are more adaptable than other garden plants; they require little effort to maintain; they come in many heights, colors, and textures; they can add winter interest; they can be used as groundcover, for erosion control, specimen plants, and as vertical design elements.

When planting ornamental grasses, prepare the soil by mixing Bumper Crop, LeafGro, or compost into the top 8 to 10 inches of the soil. Ornamental grasses do not require high amounts of fertilizer so adding about one pound of all-purpose fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. should be sufficient. If using a slow release fertilizer, one application in the spring should be sufficient for the year. Fertilizer should be watered in thoroughly.

Grasses can be planted in the spring or fall. They should be planted no deeper than their previous growing depths and they should be well watered after planting. Keep in mind the light requirements when selecting your grasses. Some varieties tolerate shade better than others. Most grasses will grow many years before they have to be divided. The best time to divide grass is in the spring, just as new growth emerges.

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- A) *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus'
- B) Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster')
- C) Zebra grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus')
- F) *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Hameln'),
- I) Blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*)



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