

Ornamental Grasses

By Luis Llenza

Ornamental grasses add elegance, character and excitement to our gardens. And, they are easy to grow. Most prefer full sun in well-drained soil, are drought tolerant, long lived and require little maintenance. These versatile plants range in height from 6 inches to 14 feet and come in a wide variety of colors and growth patterns. Just be sure to plant them purposefully, not haphazardly, or they will look like weeds you forgot to pull.

The Japanese Silver Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Variegatus') grows 4-6 feet tall and just as wide, and Pampass Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) reaches heights of 6 -10 feet. Use them as a privacy hedge or to create an architectural feature in your garden.

If you need a loosely structured border, consider Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*), which can also double as a ground cover. For a contemporary look, black Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens') works well.

Another ground cover I like is the tender fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'P. ruppelii'). This is a favorite companion planting for flower beds. For example, place it behind bronze wax begonias to highlight the showy pink, red or white flowers. Another candidate to show off colorful plants is variegated Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Variegatus'). Or try the, Evergreen Paspalum (*Paspalum quadrifarium*), a 3 - 4 foot grass with blue-green foliage to set off garden flowers.

For green-on-green drama, plant Fakahatchee grass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*). Its arching leaves of lush foliage reach 4 - 6 feet in both height and width, creating a luxurious background for smaller subtropical plantings, especially ferns.

Want even more drama? Select Vetiver Plant (*Vetiveria zizanioides*). This 6 - 7 foot grass from Senegal is unique because its leaf tip bends at the end and turns red in the fall.

You can create tropical privacy near a pond or pool with Tiger Grass (*Thysanoleana maxima*). It can grow 10 feet tall, almost as wide, and produces bamboo-like foliage with tassel-like flowers emerging green and maturing to brown. Another great ornamental is Bamboo muhly (*Muhlenbergia dumosa*). Plant it where the afternoon sun can backlight its leaves for a bamboo look, a good choice for gardens lacking enough water to support a true bamboo.

To find unique ornamental grasses contact Kurt Bluemel, one of the founding fathers of the ornamental grass movement in America, www.kurtbluemel.com or call his Florida sister-nursery, Floraland Nursery (407) 892-7400 for local nurseries with interesting offerings.