

Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses are four season plants, but my favorite season for them is winter. I like the color they add to the landscape, the way the seedheads look when backlit by the sun, and the way the stems move with the wind. Ornamental grasses also attract birds, providing food, shelter, and even nesting places.

Typically ornamental grasses are bunch grasses, meaning they grow by expanding and clumping, not by rhizomes or stolons like most turf grasses. Grasses in general are considered either warm season or cool season - which identifies when they like to grow or when they want to be dormant. Here warm season grasses grow from about May through early October when it's warm and turn brown over winter; cool season grasses grow in early spring and again in October, but want to go dormant (turn brown) during the summer. The season also defines the best time to fertilize grasses, i.e. when they are growing, not dormant. For fertilizing grasses I'd recommend applying a thin layer of compost, watered in after application in the growing season.

In nature ornamental grasses are trimmed by the wind, grazed by wildlife, or cleared by fire. Since we can't easily use fire we need to trim them to the ground annually. I do this in spring right before my bulbs come up – so I don't trim the bulb foliage. You want to trim them before the new blades begin to grow through, so you cut only the dead stems and you make it easier for the new blades to grow. Using a bungee cord or taping the bunch with a biodegradable masking tape makes clean-up much less messy. If the clump is especially wide, you can create smaller sub-bunches for cutting. You can also cut the grass in the fall, but then you'd lose the seedheads, the beautiful color over winter, and the grass will look stubby/ugly.

While you can use perennial grasses in containers I've found that after the first year it is almost impossible to remove the tight roots from the container and given enough time the grass can break the container. Use annual grasses like purple fountaingrass or Japanese bloodgrass in containers!

There are many different types and sizes of perennial ornamental grasses. Below, arranged from low/short to tall, are some of my favorites. Many of these can be found in High Desert common areas.

Blue Grama – a warm season grass, blue in color that turns blonde in the fall. The seedhead goes from an eyebrow to a circular curl as it ripens. It is the grass used in the High Desert logo and can be found in the medians and reseeded areas as well as the entrance sculptures, Water Kiva, and metal inserts in the common walls. There are a few other gramas of interest like sideoats grama which has little flags of seedheads along a vertical stem. While either of these can be used for turf, they look better in a prairie or meadow setting, uncut.

Indian Ricegrass – is a cool season grass that has a beautiful panicked seedhead, but I haven't been able to grow it in our soil. Wildlife love it and when it was in a black nursery pot on my back patio the rock squirrels couldn't stay away from it.

Blue Avena (aka blue oatgrass) – is blue in color most of the year with long wands tipped with panicles in a pale straw color. It is a cool season grass. The spiky form is rounder than vertical grasses like bluestem, looking more like a fescue. This grass grows from divisions, not seed. Currently it is being used at the main entrances.

Little Bluestem – a medium sized vertical warm season grass has blue color during most of the year and turns a rust color in the winter. It is a prairie grass that grows somewhat invasive if given lots of water. It reseeds readily.

Sand Bluestem – a medium sized warm season grass that also has blue color, but turns pink in the winter. It reseeds less readily.

Galleta – a warm season medium sized green grass with curly stiff leaf blades. It has vigorous, spreading roots & rhizomes which resprout even when repeatedly trampled. Use it for difficult areas with erosion or in heavy traffic areas like a dog run. Allow 1-2 years establishment time before heavy use. It withstands cold winters, wind, and low moisture.

Silver Beardgrass – a bright green medium sized warm season grass that turns orange in the fall. The fluffy white/silver seedhead shimmers in the sunlight.

Deergrass – a medium to tall warm season grass with stiff green leaves. The leaves turn pale platinum in the fall. It has a somewhat rounded form.

Karl Foerster feather reed grass – a very vertical green grass with a spectacular tight seedhead that turns blond during the fall. It is a cool season grass and likes a little more water than the prairie grasses. The Water Kiva and the entrance at Academy have Karl Foerster planted in them. When placed in the landscape it adds a vertical element.

Indiangrass – a very tall, somewhat coarse leaved blue colored warm season grass that turns bronze in the fall. The seedheads are multi-colored diamonds and I think are very attractive. They are lovely in dried arrangements.

Lindheimer's Muhly – a very tall, "round form" blue colored grass with fine leaves. It also turns platinum in the fall. The seedheads are narrow in dry years, but spread in the center when there's more rain in the fall.

Two other native tall grasses that might be worth looking into: Big Bluestem and Giant Sacaton. For most High Desert homes these grasses would be out of scale, but if you have an estate lot they might be worth it.

Ornamental grasses to avoid include the following:

Mexican threadgrass aka Mexican feather grass is also invasive – every little seedhead takes root and there are so many of them. I love it, the blonde winter color is beautiful, but it's not on the approved plant list. There's a reason for this. I have been told there is a sterile hybrid of this grass, but I have been unable to find it locally.

Purple Three-Awn has a purple seedhead that come apart into separate awns, each one viable. It causes problems for pets (gets stuck in their fur) and for that reason I'd avoid using it.

Regal Mist™ Muhley has pink panicles that are somewhat sharp. This grass is known as Gulf Coast muhley and that clearly defines the fact that it needs lots of water to show good color. It has invaded the open space just south of the apartments along Spain. Because of its muddy color most years and its invasiveness I would avoid this grass.

Pampas Grass has a lovely seedhead, but when it's time to trim it the serrated edges of the stems are dangerous. For your health and for the amount of effort it takes to trim this grass, I'd avoid it.

I suggest you use ornamental grasses to keep your landscape from becoming boring in the winter and to provide shelter and food to wildlife. They also hide utility boxes, but allow the power companies to cut them back if they get in the way. And from the homeowners perspective they grow back! And the winter color is just a bonus.