

# NORTHERN

# Gardener

CREATING & CARING FOR YOUR ENVIRONMENT



## Ornamental Grasses

### CARING FOR YOUR ENVIRONMENT

- ✓ Ornamental grasses are easy to grow, requiring no pesticides and minimal irrigation or fertilizer. Native grasses are adapted to local climatic conditions and can grow in sandy soils or heavy clay soils. Choose the grass that is right for your site and location.

been the ornamental grass that is most familiar to all of us, is not hardy in Minnesota and most of the plains, there are still a number of highly ornamental grasses that can add beauty to the landscape and garden.

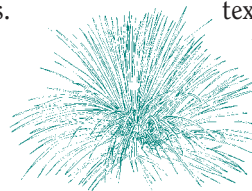
The following are some of the more ornamental grasses that have shown good winter hardiness. Like most other perennials, they will benefit from winter protection provided by a good snow cover or mulch to increase their hardiness.

They are all relatively insect and disease-free and require a minimum of maintenance. Trimming, or cutting back, the old, dried foliage in spring is about all that is required.

**Calamagrostis x acutiflora 'Karl Foerster'** (FEATHER REED GRASS) - A cool season grass that is hardy in Zone 4. Grows quickly to four feet tall and produces lovely, airy, delicate rose (later turning beige) 12-inch long flowers in June. The upright, erect seed heads turn an attractive buff color in July and remain that way through most of the winter. In fall, the foliage turns a lime-yellow before fading to winter white. One of the best all around grasses. It is trouble free, not

fussy about soil, withstands drought and provides a long season of interest. Will tolerate some shade but does best in full sun.

**Deschampsia caespitosa** (TUFTED HAIR GRASS) - Deep green tufted grass that grows to two feet. A cool season, evergreen grass that is hardy in Zone 4 and also in Zone 3. Normally found in moist, boggy sites and will do best in a moist site in partial shade. Produces delicate flowers in June that rise two feet above the plant and remain showy into winter. Because of the fine texture of the flowers, it is best used in mass to enhance the effect of the flowers.



*Helictotrichon: Silvery blue oat grass is a favorite garden plant.*

**Festuca cinerea 'Elijah Blue'** (BLUE FESCUE) - Small six-inch tall grass with attractive, fine-textured, blue foliage. Cool season grass that is hardy in Zone 4. Grown primarily for the foliage. In hot spells, the foliage may brown out but revives with the onset of cooler weather. Several other selections of Blue Fescue are available, Elijah Blue is a consistent light silver-blue. Prefers sandy, well-drained soils.

**Sporobolus heterolepis** (PRAIRIE DROPSEED) is a light and airy native grass found on dry and light soils. Its fine mound of foliage is about 2 feet

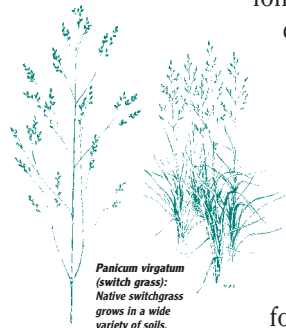
Grasses have always been the predominate part of our native prairies. We are most familiar with the use of them in the landscape as groundcovers, or what we would normally refer to as lawns. However, when used in the landscape, certain varieties of grasses can add a great deal to the texture, color, movement and even sound of the garden. They can be used as individual specimens, in mass plantings or as border plants. Many of them are also a good source of dried materials for arrangements.

Due to our northern location we are somewhat limited as to the varieties that we can use. Even though Pampas Grass (*Cordateria selloana*), which has



tall. The light, open flowers in mid- to late summer are about 4 feet tall and have a fragrance, like hot-buttered popcorn. Fall color is golden-yellow with red highlights. Easy to grow.

**Miscanthus sinensis**  
**'Purpurascens'** (RED MISCANTHUS OR FLAME GRASS) - A warm season grass that is hardy in Zone 3. Grows to 4-5 feet with satiny, magenta colored foliage in late summer. Upright form. In fall the three-quarter inch wide leaves color to a bright red-orange before fading to a silken white in winter.



*Panicum virgatum*  
 (switch grass):  
 Native switchgrass  
 grows in a wide  
 variety of soils.

**Miscanthus sinensis** **'Silver Feather'** (SILVER FEATHER MISCANTHUS) - Similar in most ways to the species but is more refined and elegant. Upright grass, 6-7 feet tall. Shimmering, white fan-shaped blooms emerge in late August. Reliably hardy in zone 4 and has done well at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

**Molina caerulea** spp. **arundinacea**  
**'Windspiel'** (MOOR GRASS) - Large grass that forms green clumps of foliage, 4-5 feet in width and 2-4 feet in height. Delicate, wire fine yellow seed heads are borne on stems of up to seven feet in July and August. Hardy in Zone 3. Best planted where it will have space to develop and against a plain background so the fine seed heads can be appreciated. Will tolerate light shade but prefers full sun.

**Panicum virgatum** (SWITCH GRASS) - Switchgrass is a hardy and tough native that will grow in wet, heavy clay soils or compacted poor

soils. It increases easily from seed, is a great wildlife cover and food for many birds. Hardy to Zone 3. Will reach up to five feet when in bloom. Slight blue cast to foliage. Switch Grass quickly develops into a bushy plant in the garden. The fine-textured, airy flowerheads are produced in late summer and turn a warm, glowing wheat color in winter. Should be cut back in early spring. Prefers full sun. Many different foliage and flower forms of switchgrass are available.



*Miscanthus sinensis*  
 Plant and inflorescence greatly  
 reduced; spikelet x 5

**Phalaris arundinacea** **'Feasey's Form'** (RIBBON GRASS) - Strongly

rhizomatous grass that forms a spreading clump of 18 to 24 inches in height. Very attractive highly variegated green, white and pink leaves. Will do well in most any soil and withstand drought particularly well. Prefers sun. Hardy in Zone 3.

**Schizachyrium scoparium**  
 (LITTLE BLUESTEM) is an attractive native grass that grows 3 feet tall. Found on drier soils, it forms a dense bunch with showy white seedheads in September and October. Its common name indicates the foliage color in summer, but in the fall it turns a dark red or orange and holds this color much of the winter. Looks great in a border with asters and chrysanthemums.



**USDA Plant Hardiness  
 General Guideline**

Zone 4 Southern Minnesota  
 Zone 3 Northern Minnesota

*Keep in mind that "micro-climates" exist in many areas that may make it warmer or colder depending upon wind and shelter considerations.*