

Ornamental grasses



ORNAMENTAL GRASSES ARE SPECTACULAR in the garden during any season of the year, but they show their full glory in the fall. Many of the new ornamental grasses are not the invasive, spreading “thugs of the garden” anymore. There are plenty that are graceful, clump forming and attractive the entire year round. And they require little maintenance – pruning them to the ground with hedge shears in early spring is all that is required each year.

One of the best types of ornamental grasses to create a dramatic, group or accent display is *Miscanthus sinensis*, or Japanese silver or maiden grass. *Miscanthus* cultivars are not invasive and can easily be divided if the clump gets too large. An excellent *Miscanthus* for a specimen planting is called *Gracillimus*. The plant has an attractive vase shape with narrow green leaves that gracefully cascade from the upright stems. In the garden three clumps could be used effectively as a focal point against a fence. In the fall, upright, reddish-tan flowers appear. The slightest breeze moves the blooms causing them to come to life. These flowers will soon turn into beige seed heads that can be left standing through the winter. The fountain effect of the tan leaves and seed heads against the snow is very picturesque.

Many newer cultivars have made their ways to garden centres lately. Some are not as hardy as *Gracillimus*, others are shorter or taller, have different blooms or foliage and still others may have better fall colour. *Gracillimus* is still one of the favourites. Others that are worth investigating are *Silberfeder* (silver feather grass, hardy to zone 4), *Grosse Fontane* (large, silver fountain grass to two metres tall), *Undine* (a compact form for smaller gardens), *Morning Light* (has a narrow band of white down the leaves, producing a shimmering effect), *Malepartus* (red flowered fountain grass with better hardiness), *Sarabande* (fine textured, silver foliage on a compact plant), *Variiegatus* (variegated, green and white striped leaves) and *Zebrinus* (zebra grass with bright green leaves having golden horizontal banding).

The feather reed grass is also a favourite. In particular, *Calamagrostis acutiflora* Karl Foerster is an excellent accent plant. Karl Foerster is a cool season grass, so much of its growth is in the spring. The early start allows the flowers to appear early in the summer (unlike the late fall blooming time of some *Miscanthus*). The flowers begin with a white colour then fade to rose and finally transform to narrow golden-tan seed heads. Use several plants to make a bigger impact using it as a strong vertical statement. Position this plant so that the late day sun can shine through the plant and make the seed heads glow. Karl Foerster is reliably hardy to zone 4.

Overdam variegated reed grass is a relative of Karl Foerster. It has boldly striped green and white leaves which contrast well with the gold flowers and seed heads that follow in mid-summer. *Stipa* is an unusual warm season grass that has had plenty of fame this past summer. That readily withstands drought. Masses of this grass tumbling down a hillside have the effect of rolling waves. *Stipa* needs excellent drainage during the winter to survive from year to year.

Another popular ornamental grass is *Panicum virgatum* (red switch grass). This native tall-grass prairie plant has been bred to produce several excellent cultivars for the garden. One of the newest is called Heavy Metal. This has bright blue foliage through the summer with highlights of yellow and red in the fall. This is a warm-season grass that is very drought tolerant and shows excellent hardiness to zone 3.