

Masses of Grasses

The translucent quality of grasses is best appreciated in early morning or late afternoon, when plants are backlit by the sun. This is especially true in the fall months, when most of the grasses are blooming or adorned with interesting seed heads. Grasses also add movement and a soothing, rustling sound to the landscape.

Andropogon gerardii...Big bluestem, Turkey foot

Early settlers christened this big grass Turkey foot, for its distinctive three-pronged seed head. Big bluestem is widespread throughout the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and was a dominant grass in the prairies of the Midwest. This clumping grass provides a strong vertical form in the landscape, growing quickly to 6 to 8 feet tall by 3 to 4 feet wide. During the warm months, the 1-inch-wide leaves are a lush blue-green color, changing to a striking coppery-red color as the temperatures cool. Silvery seed heads add a final adornment in the fall months. Durable and long-lived, Big bluestem is not fussy about soils, temperature extremes, or moisture. Since it can tolerate slightly waterlogged conditions, it would be ideal for retention basin plantings. Its large stature makes it an ideal background grass for meadow gardens. Big bluestem is cold hardy to -20° F.

Aristida purpurea...Purple three awn

The purple-tinted stems and flowers of *Aristida purpurea* attract attention during the warm months, especially where it grows abundantly along roadsides. Purple three awn has an erect growth habit, and forms a small clump to about 2 feet tall and wide. The fine-textured foliage can range in color from green to blue. In the fall, the three long awns attached to each seed glow in the sunlight. It can either be

Grasses bring unique texture as well as softness to landscapes



Artistida purpurea...Purple three awn

scattered among native shrubs and perennials, or planted in masses for maximum impact. Purple three awn has a wide distribution, growing at elevations from 1000 to 5000 feet in Arizona, Utah, Texas, New Mexico, and into the plains and northern Mexico. It thrives in sunny, dry locations, with minimal irrigation. Too much water or poor drainage will cause problems. It is hardy to about 0° F. Be warned that this little grass reseeds prolifically, and will migrate around the landscape. Its seeds have an annoying habit of clinging to socks, so keep plants away from traffic patterns.

***Bouteloua curtipendula*...Sideoats grama**

If you're looking for smaller grasses to create a meadow effect, you might consider the grama grasses. The short-grass prairies of North America are dominated by two species; Sideoats grama and Blue grama. Both of these warm-season, clumping grasses are extremely cold hardy and durable. They should be grown in full sun, although they are tolerant of varied soil conditions. In the late spring and summer masses of unusual and distinctive flower spikes and seed heads are produced. As winter approaches, these plants go dormant. Adequate irrigation is required to keep these grasses green during the extreme heat of the low deserts. The seeds are used by wildlife. Sideoats grama forms a clump to 2 feet tall by 12-15 inches in diameter, with a 2-foot-tall flower spike rising above the plant in the spring, summer and fall. After blooming, large seeds form on one side of the stiff stalk, hence the name Sideoats grama. Its narrow blue-green leaves dry to a tan color in the winter months. It will benefit from a good hard pruning or mowing in the early spring to remove dormant winter foliage and spent flower spikes.

***Bouteloua gracilis*...Blue grama**

Although similar in appearance and uses to Sideoats grama, Blue grama is easily identified by its distinctive curved "comblike" seedheads, which appear during the summer. These seedheads contribute a light, airy feel to meadow gardens. The leaves are light green, drying to a tan color in the winter. In the hot, low deserts Blue grama tends to be a small bunchgrass to 2 feet tall by 2 feet wide. In cooler, moist climates it can form a fairly dense sod. Or combine it with Purple prairieclover (*Petalostemum purpureum*) and other perennial wildflowers and leave it unmowed for a casual feel.

***Hilaria rigida*...Big galleta**

Big galleta is a perennial, shrub-like grass most often used for revegetation and erosion control. This native of North America usually occurs in sandy soils up to 5000 feet in elevation. It has a rough appearance; with coarse blue-green leaves forming a dense clump to 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide. From spring through fall it produces slender, dense spikes of greenish flowers. Big galleta is fast growing, long-lived, very drought tolerant, and hardy to 10° F. It should be planted in full sun and well-drained soil, and cut to the ground every few years. Be aware that this grass is allergenic.

***Muhlenbergia capillaris* Regal Mist™**

This native of east Texas has taken the Southwest by storm in the past few years. During their fall bloom period, mass plantings of Regal Mist™ can literally stop traffic! The haze of deep pink flowers covering the plant is especially stunning when backlit by the sun. *Muhlenbergia capillaris* is a small clump grass with narrow, glossy green leaves. The foliage forms a dense rosette to three feet tall and wide, with the frothy flowers adding another 1-2 feet of height in the fall months. This fast-growing plant should be cut almost to the ground in late winter or early spring to remove the brown leaves and spent flowers. In cold regions it will turn winter dormant, but is root hardy to at least 0° F. Regal Mist™ thrives in full sun and reflected heat locations, and even tolerates light shade. It is adapted to a wide range of soils, from sand to clay, and survives drastic fluctuations in water supply. While it will survive with very little water, it needs ample irrigation to look its best in the summertime. To date, reseeding has not been a problem when plants are watered with drip irrigation. Use Regal Mist™ in bold sweeps, nestled up against boulders or low walls for a softening effect, or around water features and swimming pools.

***Muhlenbergia dumosa*...Bamboo muhly**

Bamboo muhly provides a totally unique look for the garden. Its chartreuse, very fine-textured foliage creates a soft, billowy appearance, providing a wonderful foil for bold succulents and cacti.

Compared to the other muhly grasses, its flowers are insignificant. Bamboo muhly spreads slowly from underground stems, eventually forming a clump to 4-5 feet tall and wide. It thrives in full sun or part shade, and is adapted to a wide range of soils. It appreciates moderate to ample summer irrigation. Bamboo muhly is hardy to at least 10° F.

***Muhlenbergia emersleyi* El Toro™ ...Bull grass**

Muhlenbergia emersleyi is native to rocky slopes in oak woodlands from Arizona to Texas. El Toro™ was collected in southeastern Arizona, where it grows in dense colonies. This blue-green grass is smaller and more dense than Deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), growing to about 2-3 feet tall and wide. In the fall months it sends up loose, dark purple flower spikes. El Toro™ is very drought tolerant, and grows equally well in full sun or part shade. It is root hardy to at least 10° F.

***Muhlenbergia lindheimeri* Autumn Glow™**

This Texas native makes a great backdrop for *Muhlenbergia capillaris* Regal Mist™. During the fall months, its tall spikes of light yellow flowers glow when backlit by the sun. The narrow, light green leaves form a dense mound to 5 feet tall and wide. Autumn Glow™ is very adaptable, tolerating full sun to almost full shade, and most soil types. It is a good choice for retention basins or other areas that receive periodic flooding. It is root hardy to at least 10° F.

***Muhlenbergia rigens*...Deer grass**

Dependable and adaptable, Deer grass is the backbone of many desert gardens. The lush green-grey foliage softens boulders, cacti, and is ideal for use around water features.



Bouteloua gracilis...Blue grama

Native to the Southwest at elevations up to 7000 feet, Deer grass thrives in varied conditions. It flourishes in full sun and difficult reflected heat exposures, and tolerates quite a bit of shade. Deer grass is extremely drought tolerant, although the foliage browns out if adequate water is not available in the summer. It also handles high rainfall, virtually any soils, and is root hardy to at least 0° F. In the fall it sends up slender tan flower spikes that create a stunning contrast with the four to five foot mound of luxuriant foliage. Since Deer grass can reseed if watered with overhead irrigation systems, drip irrigation is recommended.

***Muhlenbergia rigida* Nashville™**

Sometimes a small, low-growing grass is needed as a border or in areas with site visibility restrictions. Nashville™ fits the bill, growing to about 2 feet tall and wide. It has fine-textured light green foliage that goes completely dormant in the winter, even in low desert locations. In the late summer and fall it sends up purple-tan spikes that dry to a wheat color. Its growth requirements and habits are very similar to those of Deer grass, and it is also hardy to 0° F.

***Saccharum ravennae* ...Ravenna grass**

Burned out on Pampas grass? Ravenna grass, native to the Mediterranean and Africa, makes a great alternative. It has a large, bold silhouette, showy flower spikes, and is even harder than Pampas grass, down to -10° F. During warm weather it quickly forms a 5 foot clump of 1 inch wide, medium green leaves. In the summer, 12 to 14 foot flower spikes develop, and shimmering creamy silver plumes appear in August and September. The foliage and flower spikes of this impressive grass turn a dramatic copper



Muhlenbergia rigida Nashville™

color in the winter months. Clumps can be sheared back in early spring. This adaptable grass thrives in both cold climates and the intense heat of low deserts, although it requires long warm summers for flower development. Reseeding can become a nuisance in very warm regions, so drip irrigation is recommended. It seems to thrive in any soils. The flower spikes are coveted for fresh and dried arrangements. Use it as a background screen for smaller shrubs and grasses.

***Schizachyrium scoparium*...Little bluestem**

Widespread across North America, Little bluestem's range extends up to 10,000 foot elevations. Native stands of Little bluestem show great variability in growth forms and appearance. Plants range in height from 2 to 4 feet tall, and foliage color varies from green to blue. Dormant foliage can also vary in color, from tan to rusty red. Blue-leaved plants are more likely to develop reddish winter color. Little bluestem tends to have a very upright form, and fine-textured foliage. The flower spikes are not particularly showy, but develop into seed heads that are striking when backlit by the sun. This clump grass is very adaptable, tolerating temperatures down to -30° F as well as hot summers, and thriving in alkaline or acid soils. However, it does not perform well in soils with excessive moisture or nutrients. Mix it into a meadow planting with wildflowers and grama grasses, or in other full sun exposures.

***Sporobolus airoides*...Alkali sacaton**

While Alkali sacaton is used primarily for reclamation and revegetation projects, it has great potential as an ornamental grass. It has a very useful and



Stipa tenuissima ...Mexican feather grass, Threadgrass

desirable growth habit, forming a rounded clump to 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide. The wide green leaves turn gold in the fall, drying to a tan color in the winter months. In the summer it sends up tall, airy, rosy flower spikes that fade to buff. These graceful spikes show up especially well against dark-colored walls. Alkali sacaton grows in virtually any soils, including difficult saline situations. These traits, combined with its usefulness in soil stabilization, have made it an effective reclamation grass. Alkali sacaton is native across the western U.S. and Mexico, at elevations from 2500 to 6500 feet. It thrives in hot low deserts, and is cold hardy to -20° F.

***Stipa tenuissima* (*Nassella tenuissima*)...Mexican feather grass, Threadgrass**

This delightful little grass is soft and inviting, bringing a unique texture to any landscape. Light breezes turn this fine-textured and billowy grass into living



Muhlenbergia rigens ...Deer Grass

sculpture. Mexican feather grass grows to 18 to 24 inches tall and wide, forming a clump of threadlike leaves and stems. In the warm months Mexican feather grass is a refreshing chartreuse color, changing to gold as the temperatures drop. Tuck it among boulders and accent plants for a softening effect. It is spectacular in mass plantings! At higher elevations it thrives in full sun, but appreciates light shade in the low deserts. It is fast-growing and fairly short lived, but naturalizes in the landscape. To keep reseeding to a minimum, water with a drip irrigation system and avoid planting in regions with high rainfall. Mexican feather grass can be cut back in early spring to remove dormant foliage and dried seed heads. It is native to New Mexico, Texas, Mexico and Argentina, at elevations from 5000 to 7000 feet. It is cold hardy to -10° F.



www.mswm.com