

Masses of Grasses



Ornamental grasses have been steadily gaining popularity in the xeric landscapes of the American Southwest. Their gentle silhouettes help to soften designs devoted to plants chosen to exist in the harsh extremes of heat and dryness. Surprisingly, there are a number of grass species that can thrive in the desert, many with only occasional supplemental water. Most of the varieties listed here also provide great seasonal interest during their bloom seasons. There are many different sized mature plants to choose from, ensuring that there is a good candidate for any landscape.

One important factor to consider with ornamental grasses is what time of the year they are actively growing. Grasses are generally split into two groups: cool season and warm season grasses. Cool season grasses experience their best growth from early spring to early summer, when temperatures fall within the 50 to 80 degrees F range. Warm season grasses will grow most actively from mid-spring through the early fall, when temperatures fall between 70 and 100 degrees F. It is most important to maintain regular irrigation through active growing seasons to ensure good root development and future drought tolerance. Keep in mind that these notations do not ensure whether a variety of grass is evergreen or goes dormant, there is a mix of both for each type.

While ornamental grasses are not maintenance free, they require very little pruning and care through the seasons. Dormant grasses are best left alone through the winter, and then trimmed to the ground right around the average last day of frost for your region. Here in Phoenix, pruning is best done right around Valentine's Day. Ornamental grasses should be cut down to only a few inches above the ground, and this should only be done once per year. Plants trimmed this way will respond rapidly to warming temperatures, new growth should be expected within just a week or two of trimming as the season warms up.

Cool Season Grasses

***Calamagrostis X acutifolia* 'Karl Foerster'** Karl Foerster' Feather Reed Grass is possibly the most useful plant available for creating a strong vertical form in high desert garden design. Even after heavy rains and strong winds, it retains its narrow upright posture. The deep green foliage is complemented by narrow tan flower spikes. It is long-lived, adaptable to most climates, and it is sterile, so reseeding is not a problem. The flowers hold up well in fresh or dried cut flower arrangements. It will tolerate full sun to part shade, and soils ranging from gravel to clay. It is most adapted to middle and high elevations.





Carex tumulicola Berkeley Sedge ranges from the state of Washington to central California, occurring in arid areas. The foliage is dark green, forming arching clumps to 18 inches tall and wide. The small brown flowers are not showy, but provide some textural interest, dancing above the foliage on tall stems. Berkeley Sedge spreads slowly from rhizomes. While we prefer it in an unmowed, natural form, it is said to be a great lawn substitute.

Festuca glauca This small cool season grass is best suited for middle and higher elevations. It is not happy in the low deserts. Native to France, this popular clumping grass is commonly used as a groundcover. In the summer the blue foliage is crowned with flower spikes that quickly turn tan, and adorn the plant through the winter. A late winter shearing is recommended to keep the plants looking fresh and well-groomed. This grass is quite short-lived, especially in hot climates or when grown in heavy clay soils.



Nassella tenuissima (Stipa t.) This delightful little grass is soft and inviting, bringing a unique texture to any landscape. Mexican feather grass grows 18 to 24 inches tall and wide, forming a clump of threadlike leaves and stems. 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 drip irrigation and avoid planting in regions with high rainfall. Plants can be cut back in early spring to remove dormant foliage and dried seed heads.

Warm Season Grasses

Andropogon scoparius (Schyzacrium s.) Widespread across North America, Little bluestem's native range extends up to 10,000 feet in elevation. Native stands of little bluestem show great variability in growth form 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. 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.





Aristida purpurea The purple-tinged 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. In the fall, the three long awns attached to each seed glow in the sunlight. It can either be scattered among native shrubs and perennials or planted in masses for maximum impact. Purple three awn thrives in sunny, dry locations, with minimal irrigation. This grass does reseed but is manageable.

Bouteloua curtipendula The short-grass prairies of North America are dominated by two grasses: 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. Adequate irrigation is required to keep these grasses green during the extreme heat of the low deserts. Sideoats grama forms a clump to 2 feet tall by 12-15 inches in diameter, with a 2-foot-tall spike of purple-tinged flowers rising above the plant in the spring, summer and fall. After blooming, large seeds form on one side of the stiff stalk. Its narrow green leaves dry to a tan color in the winter months.



Bouteloua gracilis This small bunchgrass grows to 2 feet tall and wide, and is easily identified by its distinctive curved “comb-like” seedheads, which appear during the summer. Its narrow green leaves dry to a tan color in the winter months. In cool, moist climates *B. gracilis* can form a fairly dense sod, or combine it with perennial wildflowers and leave it unmowed for a casual feel. This warm-season, clumping grass is extremely cold hardy and durable. Plant in full sun, but provide ample summer irrigation in the low deserts to maintain a lush green look.

Bouteloua gracilis ‘Blonde Ambition’ P.P.#22048 Selected by renowned plantsman David Salman of High Country Gardens in Santa Fe, this showy selection of blue grama grass has huge chartreuse flowers that dance above the foliage. They mature into long-lasting blonde seedheads that add interest all year. This selection of blue grama is larger than the species, growing to 30-36 inches tall. The narrow green leaves dry to a tan color in the winter months. This warm-season, clumping grass is extremely cold hardy and durable. Plant in full sun, but provide ample summer irrigation in the low deserts to maintain a lush green look.





Cortaderia selloana 'Pumila' Most residential landscapes are too small for the full-sized Pampas Grass, so consider this dwarf version, which tops out at 4–6 feet tall and wide. It produces tall flower stalks bearing large fluffy white plumes in the summer. This dwarf variety seems to be sterile as well. It is adaptable to wet, heavy clay soils, as well as dry or sandy soils. It also tolerates variable pH levels, salt and wind. The foliage should be cut to the ground in early spring.

Dichondra argentea This knockout herbaceous perennial is evergreen, with soft, rounded silver leaves that look like pewter. Native to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and northern Mexico, it thrives in climates such as Austin, TX, where these photos were taken. Although not especially cold hardy (to 20-25° F), it is fast-growing and is a popular annual in colder climates. Often selected to cascade out of planters and pots, it also makes a durable and lovely groundcover, rooting along the stem nodes if soil is available. Silver Ponyfoot needs good drainage, and will appreciate some afternoon shade in the hot low deserts.



Muhlenbergia capillaris Regal Mist® This native of east Texas can literally stop traffic during fall bloom! The haze of deep pink flowers covering the plant is especially stunning when backlit by the sun. Regal Mist® is a small clump grass with narrow, glossy green leaves. The foliage forms a dense rosette with the frothy flowers adding another 1-2 feet of height in the fall months. In cold regions it will turn winter dormant. Regal Mist® thrives in full sun and reflected heat locations, and even tolerates light shade. While it will survive with very little water, it needs ample irrigation to look its best in the summertime. Reseeding has not been an issue.

Muhlenbergia capillaris 'White Cloud' This selection is a medium sized grass that is a bit larger and slightly more upright than Pink Muhly. Its green, needle-like flower stems emerge during the fall and rise a foot or more above the foliage, creating an excellent texture variation for perennial borders. Plant in full sun in a wide range of soils. Traditionally found in wet prairies and well-drained upland pine forests, it can tolerate a variety of soil types and moisture conditions. It blooms a bit later than Pink Muhly and as such, stands out in the late fall with its white airy plumes elevated high. Although quite drought tolerant, it requires supplemental irrigation when planted but is very low maintenance and works well in roadside and median plantings.





Muhlenbergia dubia This little known grass is a petite alternative to Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) or Big Muhly (*Muhlenbergia lindheimeri*) when space is limited. The green leaves are stiff and upright, providing the tidy formal look of Big Muhly, while the flowers are narrow tan rods similar to those of Deer Grass. It would be a great choice for mass planting in medians with site visibility restrictions or narrow planting areas where space is limited. Also consider using it to soften plantings of agaves and yuccas.

Muhlenbergia dumosa 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 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 part shade exposures, but will tolerate full sun in more humid environments.



Muhlenbergia emersleyi 'El Toro' This selection was collected in southeastern Arizona, and was selected for its showy rosy-purple panicles. This petite, dense grass grows to about 2 feet tall and wide, with a slightly coarse texture. The long blue-green leaves are wider than the other Muhlenbergia species we grow. In the fall months it sends up masses of loose, rosy-purple flower spikes, which dry to a tan color in the winter. This is one of the most drought-tolerant muhlys, and thrives in full sun and reflected heat locations. It also handles shady exposures, and almost any soils.

Muhlenbergia lindheimeri Autumn Glow® This Texas native grass has a long and successful history as a durable landscape staple. The narrow, light green leaves form a dense mound to 5 feet tall by 4 feet wide. During the fall months, its tall spikes of tan flowers glow when backlit by the sun. 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 makes a great backdrop for *Muhlenbergia capillaris* Regal Mist®. It will turn dormant in most regions in the winter months, and requires a heavy pruning in the early spring to remove brown foliage.





Muhlenbergia reverchonii Undaunted® At first glance this grass resembles its sister *Muhlenbergia capillaris* (Gulf Muhly). While not quite as flashy, this grass has some subtle strengths of her own. Undaunted® Seep Muhly is smaller, often topping out at 2 feet tall. It blooms earlier in the fall with softer pink flowers and is considerably more cold hardy than *Muhlenbergia capillaris*. Seep Muhly is very resilient; handling dry, rocky limestone soils and moist clay soils equally well. It is extremely resistant to browsing by deer and other animals. Undaunted® is best suited for higher elevations, and does not perform well in the low deserts.

Muhlenbergia rigens Dependable and adaptable, Deer Grass is the backbone of many desert gardens. The lush gray-green foliage softens boulders, cacti, and is ideal for use around water features. Native to the Southwest at elevations up to 7000 feet, Deer Grass thrives in varied conditions. It flourishes in full sun, reflected heat, and even tolerates partial 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 quite cold tolerant. In the fall it sends up slender, tan flower spikes that create a stunning contrast with the four to five foot mound of foliage. Since Deer Grass can reseed if watered with overhead irrigation, 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, just a bit smaller in overall size.

Muhlenbergia X 'Pink Flamingo' Plantsman John Fairey spied this progeny of *Muhlenbergia capillaris* and *Muhlenbergia lindheimeri* in his gardens near Hempstead, Texas. This hybrid combines the best of both parents, with the strong vertical form of Lindheimer muhly and the pink flowers of Gulf muhly. A narrow, upright clump of thin blue-green leaves is topped in the fall with dramatic arching plumes of soft pink flowers, reminiscent of headdresses worn by Vegas showgirls. This grass is ideal for use in narrow spaces and in mass plantings. It is heat, cold and drought tolerant, and resistant to deer grazing.





Panicum virgatum 'Shenandoah' This is an excellent ornamental grass for most landscapes, tolerating a wide range of soils and handling drought as well as ample irrigation. This grass has a strong upright form when grown in full sun. The foliage emerges blue-green in the spring, but develops wonderful streaks of red in the summer months. An airy cloud of red-pink flowers hovers above the foliage beginning in late summer, turning to beige as the seeds mature in the fall. Cut back annually, if needed, to maintain a dense form. Switch grasses are native to the Midwestern U.S.

Sorghastrum nutans A component of the tallgrass prairie, this attractive and bold grass provides a tall upright form in meadow gardens. It is native to the central and eastern United States. The wide blue-green leaves can rise to 7 feet, developing a deep orange to purple hue in the fall. Very showy fluffy golden-brown flower spikes emerge in the early fall. It handles a wide range of conditions, growing well in sun to shade, and in dry to moist soils. Indian Grass is a larval host for butterflies.



Sporobolus airoides 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 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 tan. Alkali Sacaton grows in virtually any soils, including difficult saline situations. This trait, combined with its usefulness in soil stabilization, has made it an effective reclamation grass.

Sporobolus wrightii 'Windbreaker' This grass species is native from west Texas to southeastern Arizona at elevations from 2000 to 7000 feet. It is found in dry, alkaline, sandy open areas or rocky slopes. This large selection was made in New Mexico for use as a windbreak, and can reach heights up to 10 feet! Showy, branched feather-like seed heads are produced on slender stalks to 12 feet tall in late summer. The gray green leaves fade to yellow in the fall and turn beige in the winter.



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