

Growing Ornamental Grasses in Montana



Ornamental grasses have been used in European and Asian gardens for centuries. It is only in recent years that they have become popular in the United States. Gardeners have been looking for interesting plants that require little care and maintenance while still providing year round interest. Ornamental grasses have filled this niche with their attractive forms, colors, textures and elements of sound and movement.



Landscaping &
Garden Center

Throughout the year the upright, mounding and cascading forms of our many grasses complement the garden's perennials and shrubs. From blue to rich green, variegated and solid-colored blades provide gentle summer sounds as they sway in the breeze. As the warm days and cooler nights of autumn alter the perennial garden, grasses come into their 'heyday'. Fall flowers may be silvers or tans or purples, and as delicate as fairy wings, as familiar as oats or as flamboyant as ostrich feathers. Many grasses alter their colors as the season moves into winter, turning from greens to reds or coppery browns. Whatever the need, grasses are more than a ground cover and can stand (or sway) well on their own.

Desirable traits

- Very few insect or disease problems, resulting in less chemical spraying.
- Low nutrient requirements, which means no fertilizing needed.
- Little maintenance (except spring cutback) once established.
- Most grasses have moderate water requirements once established.
- More than one season of interest; flowering in spring, summer, or fall, with beauty and color lasting into winter.
- Fast growth; for example, some large plants grow 5-8 ft. tall by the second year.
- Varied textures, from fine fescues to coarse giant miscanthus.
- Foliage colors of blue, yellow, bronze and red, as well as variegated white and yellow.
- Movement with the wind, which provides interesting sounds as well as beauty.
- Most grasses are deer resistant.

Planting—Ornamental grasses can be planted anytime of the year if they are container grown. Determine spacing needs according to the desired landscape effect and the plant's setting. A general rule of thumb is to space plants equal to their mature height (plants 4 feet tall are spaced 4 feet apart), but you can use more or less space to achieve a desired effect. For example, grasses used as a hedge or screen can be planted closer together, while individual specimens are typically spaced further apart.

Watering—Grasses should be well watered the first season so they can develop a good root system. Established ornamental grasses rarely need irrigation except in cases of drought or very sandy soil. The amount of water will depend on the species of grass, the site and the weather.

Fertilizing—Unless your soil is very poor, it is generally not recommended to fertilize ornamental grasses. Over-fertilizing will result in excessive weak growth, which will blow over in the first strong wind.

Cutting back—Cut back ornamental grasses to about 4-6 inches in the spring before new growth emerges. Be careful not to cut into the crown of the plant. If the grasses are not cut back, spring growth will be delayed and the plants will be unattractive late into the growing season. Blue Fescue and Blue Oat Grass will retain living blue leaves through the winter. Trim back just the dead and winter burned blades on the Blue Fescue and trim the Blue Oat Grass to 8 inches. Manual trimming with a string or electric hedge trimmer works well for small areas. Large grasses are easier to cut back if they are tied together first and cut with sharp hedge shears. Be sure to wear gloves to protect your hands as the grass blades can be sharp. Large areas can be burned, if burning is permitted and closely supervised. Do not cut or burn in the fall, because winter injury may result, and the winter beauty of the plants will be lost.

Dividing—Divide grasses in the spring if the center of the plant shows little or no growth or if you want to produce more plants. To do this, dig out the plant and cut with a hacksaw, sharp spade or knife into as many plants as needed and replant. This is a great way to acquire new plants for free.

VARIETIES OF GRASSES WE CARRY

AVALANCHE FEATHER REED GRASS

Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Avalanche'

Height: 3-4 feet Spread: 2-3 feet

Full sun to part shade Zone: 4

An attractive clump forming grass with variegated foliage. White, tinged pink flower spikes emerge June to Sept. An improvement over the variety of 'Overdam'. Tolerates a wide range of soil types and is drought tolerant once established.

BIG BLUESTEM GRASS

Andropogon gerardii

Height: 4-7 feet Spread: 4 feet

Full sun to part shade Zone: 4

A native North American Prairie Grass forming a large clump of silvery-blue foliage. Purplish flower spikes emerge in Aug. and Sept. Prefers moist, fertile soil but drought tolerant once established. Thrives in either heavy or sandy soil.

BLONDE AMBITION GRASS

Bouteloua gracilis 'Blonde Ambition'

Height: 2.5-3 feet Spread: 3 feet

Full sun to part shade Zone: 4

This native grass has a profusion of big, showy char-
treuse flowers held horizontally above the leaves. Its
flower stems mature to long lasting blonde seed heads.
Flag-like flowers rise up from the blue-green foliage in
mid-summer and are held on stiff, weather resistant
stems. Great winter interest as the seed heads remain
standing. This beauty is extremely cold hardy and is a
perfect choice for low maintenance landscapes.

BLUE HEAVEN LITTLE BLUE STEM

Schizachyrium scoparium 'MinnblueA'

Height: 4-5 feet Spread: 2-2.5 feet

Full sun Zone: 3

Attractive blue foliage changes in the fall to shades of
red, burgundy and purple. Clump forming. Prefers well
drained soil.

BLUE OAT GRASS

Helictotrichon sempervirens

Height: 2-3 feet Spread: 2 feet

Full sun or light shade Zone: 3

Tufted evergreen grass with narrow blue-gray foliage.
It adds a unique color accent to sunny borders. In the
summer, upright stems bear straw colored flowers. It is
tolerant of heavy soil but prefers good drainage.

BLUE OAT GRASS - SAPPHIRE

Helictotrichon sempervirens 'Saphirsprudel'

Height: 2.5 feet Spread: 2-2.5 feet

Full sun or light shade Zone: 4

Tufted evergreen grass with narrow bright steel blue
foliage. It adds a unique color accent to sunny borders.
In the summer, upright stems bear straw colored flowers.
It is tolerant of heavy soil but prefers good drainage.

ELDORADO FEATHER REED GRASS

Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Eldorado'

Height: 4-5 feet Spread: 2 feet

Full sun Zone: 4

The narrow, green leaves have a bright gold center
which radiates out in the sunlight. Attractive tan wheat-
like seed heads appear in early summer and last all
season long. 'Eldorado' prefers to be grown in full sun
and well-drained soil. Be sure to provide plenty of
moisture in extremely hot weather.

HEAVY METAL SWITCH GRASS

Panicum virgatum 'Heavy Metal'

Height: 3-4 feet Spread: 2-3 feet

Full sun Zone: 3

Metallic blue foliage all season that turns yellow and
red in autumn. Wonderful addition to the back of the
border or mass planted. Attractive airy flower heads.
Prefers moist, well-drained soils.

KARL FOERSTER FEATHER REED GRASS

Calamagrostis x acutiflora

Height: 4.5-5 feet Spread: 3 feet

Full sun to part shade Zone: 4

Stiff, upright flowers are pink in July, turning beige by
August creating a wheat-like appearance. Finely cut
leaves create an elegant background. Good fall color
adds value to this highly ornamental grass. Tolerates a
wide range of soil types, but thrives in clay soil. Can
grow in wet, boggy areas as well as dry areas.

NORTHERN SEA OATS

Chasmanthium latifolium

Height: 2-3 feet Spread: 2-2.5 feet

Full Sun or part shade Zone: 4

Cool season, clump forming, full to part shade grass
that has a really unique flat seed head. Useful in dried
arrangements. Leaf blades are bamboo like.

NORTHWIND SWITCH GRASS

Panicum virgatum 'Northwind'

Height: 40-50" Spread 36"

Full Sun Zone: 4

Olive green leaves in Spring to golden yellow in fall
providing great winter interest. This narrow and upright
grass is one of the best vertical forms of any of the
many panicum cultivars. 2014 perennial plant of the
year.

PRAIRIE SKY SWITCH GRASS

Panicum virgatum 'Prairie Sky'

Height: 4-5 feet Spread: 2-3 feet

Full sun Zone: 4

An attractive clump forming grass with incredible blue
tones to the foliage. Showy, silvery-pink plumes rise
above the foliage in summer. Makes an excellent accent
or specimen plant. Prefers moist soil.

SHENANDOAH SWITCH GRASS

Panicum virgatum 'Shenandoah'

Height: 3-4 feet Spread: 2-3 feet

Full sun Zone: 4

A beautiful grass with soft, true green foliage in sum-
mer. By July dark red tones appear on the leaves, then
the whole plant turns a powerful burgundy in late fall.
Flowers in late summer with airy rose colored plumes.
Fast growing. Prefers well drained soils.

SKYRACER MOOR GRASS

Molina caerulea 'Skyracer'

Height: 6-7.5 feet Spread: 3 feet

Full sun to part shade Zone: 4

Purplish flower plumes rise above dark green, clumping
foliage that turns a beautiful gold in the fall. Prefers a
moist, well drained soil.

THE BLUES LITTLE BLUESTEM GRASS

Schizachyrium scoparium 'The Blues'

Height: 3 feet Spread: 2 feet

Full sun Zone: 4

A native American prairie grass which derives its name
from the blue color present at the base of the clump.
The attractive blue-green foliage turns a rich red-
orange color after a frost. Prefers a well drained soil.

TUFTED HAIR GRASS

Deschampsia caespitosa

Height: 2 feet Spread: 2 feet

Part shade Zone: 4

An evergreen, deep green tufted grass. Normally
grown in moist, boggy sites, and will do best in a moist
site. Produces delicate flowers in June that rise 2 feet
above the plant and remain showy into winter. Use in
mass plantings to enhance the flower effect.

VARIEGATED MOOR GRASS

Molina caerulea 'Variegata'

Height: 30 inches Spread: 30 inches

Full sun to part shade Zone: 3

Bright yellow and green, striped leaves. Showy in the
fall, when the foliage glows with soft hues of gold and
orange, accompanied y purplish flower plumes. Prefers
moist, well drained soils.

ANNUAL GRASS

PURPLE FOUNTAIN GRASS

Pennisetum setaceum 'Rubrum'

Height: 2 feet Spread: 2 feet

Full sun Zone: 8

This grass is an annual in our climate. This drought-
tolerant grass forms neat clumps with purplish-maroon
blades topped by rose-red flower spikes summer
through fall. An excellent grass for containers.



2025 2nd Ave. NW
Great Falls, MT 59404
Phone: 406-727-0950 Fax: 406-727-4817
Email: mail@forde-nursery.com
www.forde-nursery.com

