



# Ornamental Grasses

Not since the age of Queen Victoria has the current popularity of ornamental grasses been so grand. Scores of ornamental grasses are now in use in formal and informal landscapes with many new forms continuously being added to the palette annually. Perhaps the rise in popularity centers on the aesthetics of form, texture and color but more notable is the group's practical side – ease of maintenance and sensitivity to the environment. As homeowners and professionals alike become increasingly aware of nontoxic methods to care for a landscape, many ornamental grasses have an inherent ability to handle the extremes of drought and excessive rain.

During the growing season, the ornamental grasses range in height from 6 inches to 14 or more feet and can be used as accent plants, ground covers, screens, border edgings, or as companions with a wide range of flowering herbaceous plants. Color of foliage in the growing season includes shades of green, green/yellow, green/blue, blue, red, brown, and variegated. Flowers vary in form, size, color and time of bloom thereby providing a wealth of choices. Dried foliage and flowers on many ornamental grasses are attractive and will gracefully sway with the wind in the cooler

months and add a new dimension to the winter garden. Many are excellent for use in floral arrangements.

## Culture

Ornamental grasses are propagated from seed or division, and can be purchased from local garden stores and by mail order (*see list of mail order sources on the next page*). Generally, the improved strains, which include most of the new varieties, will not come true from seed and must be propagated from divisions. Grasses do not transplant or propagate well after mid-summer because root growth slows dramatically. Container-grown plants may be



*Cortaderia selloana*



*Cortaderia selloana*, detail

transplanted into the landscape throughout the growing season, however. Depending on the grass variety the foliage portion of the plant may be cut down to the ground and removed each spring. In such cases, fertilization is required to compensate for nutrient loss. A 10-10-10 fertilizer may be applied at a rate of 1 to 2 pounds per 100 square feet. A good deal of calcium and magnesium is lost when removing foliage and a soil test should be done periodically.

## Cautions

Before placing a grass into the landscape you should determine if it is rhizomatous (spreading by underground stems) or a clump former. Rhizomatous types make excellent ground covers, erosion control plants, and dense cover plantings that resist the invasion of weeds. The rhizomatous types spread at different rates laterally, some as much as twelve or more feet a year. The clump formers simply increase in circumference requiring division every two or three years. Distinguishing between the two types and locating them in proper sites will prevent future unwanted problems.

## Selections for Central Florida

Given the sunny and rain-filled environment, one would think that just about any grass will perform well in Central Florida. Unfortunately, because of the sunny and rain-filled climate a limited number perform with fervor and enthusiasm. From ongoing trials performed at Leu Gardens over the last five years, the staff has determined the following are best suited for the local conditions:

**Crown Grass (*Paspalum quadrifolium*):**

Hands down the finest medium sized grass for Central Florida and is a Florida Nurseryman and Growers Plant of the Year plant for 2003. It forms a perfectly rounded mound with blue-gray foliage to 36" tall and is perfect for the full sun and a variety of soils. On a scale of 1-10, this is an eleven.

**Tiger grass (*Thysanolaena maxima*):** If you are looking for a tall (to 8') with graceful seed heads and strong architectural features, tiger grass fits the bill. Very large, linear leaves enhance this clump-forming ornamental grass. Outstanding and very underutilized. For full sun to part shade.

**Muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia spp.*):** Pink Muhly (*M. capillaris*) grows to 36" and produces dark green foliage topped with masses of open pink to red panicles. It

is a Florida native. Bamboo Muhly (*M. dumosa*) grows to 48" and is distinctly different from other lacy muhly grasses with its bamboo-like effect. Both are very drought tolerant and grow in full sun to part shade.

**Quaking Oat Grass (*Chasmanthium***

*latifolium*): The drooping native oat-like seedpods are very attractive in the garden and grows to 24" tall in Central Florida. It is tolerant of shade, drought, salt and spreads fairly rapidly. The seeds serve as food for many types of wildlife. The dry plants persist in winter and are sometimes used in dry flower arrangements. Full sun is best for maximum seed production.



*Chasmanthium latifolium*

**Plume or Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia***

*selections*): Pampas grass has been around for years in local landscapes. New selections of this tough grass are worth considering. *C. selloana* 'Pumila' is a great new selection. Like the larger form in every way, this is simply a giant pampas grass in miniature – only 48" tall. A perfect plant for those small spaces. *Cortaderia selloana* 'Silver Comet' doesn't look like a pampas grass in that we have never seen a "plume" produced. However, the thin graceful arching ribbons of foliage are alternately striped green and white. A very handsome specimen plant for that very special place. *C. aureolineata* 'Gold Band' grows to only 36", does not produce a plume and has alternating green and gold leaf stripes. For a large pampas grass with an unusual twist why not try *C. selloana* 'Flamingo' – a full-sized pampas grass but with a delicate pink 8' tall plume. All grow in full sun.

Japanese silver grass (*Miscanthus* selections) is another great group of grasses for Central Florida. As Rick Darke says in

his book, "... *miscanthus* are unrivaled in the diversity and beauty of its flowers, foliage, autumn colors and winter presence... and its ability to survive and prosper in some of the most challenging cultural conditions imaginable." There are more than 100

named selections of *Miscanthus* but some notable varieties for Central Florida include: *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio' (to 48", thin silver foliage, pink seed head turns to white, blooms in August), M. 'Emerald Shadow' (a green form of the sickly *Miscanthus* 'Cabaret' without the propensity for diseases, fresh green

foliage to 8', a very strong grower), M. 'Morning Light' (silver striped, to 6', best planted in groups, blooms in October), and *Miscanthus transmorisonensis* (blooms continuously from June – November and perfect for the small garden). *Miscanthus villosus* has very narrow leaf blades to 18" tall and the seed head is pure white and very soft and fluffy in appearance. Full sun.

Vetiver (*Vetiveria zizanoides*) is a tall clump forming grass to 8' tall, which has been grown for centuries for its sweet aromatic roots, used to make baskets, furniture, and screens. Vetiver oil has long been used as a source for perfume. Vetiver is a robust vertical grower has a curious habit of folding over one or two feet from the tip. It makes a fine specimen or hedge and performs well as a windbreak. The flowers work well in floral arrangements.

Fountain grass (*Pennisetum* selections) is equally as home as *Miscanthus* varieties. If one thinks of grass in Central Florida

this is the group that readily comes to mind. The most popular is Purple Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum') and is readily available in local garden stores. Though it prefers moist well-drained areas, it can be grown in drier areas as well. Full sun is a must and the feathery red-purple plumes are visible throughout the summer.

Other less-known but equally strong performers include: *P.* 'Burgundy Giant' (to six feet, bronze-purple leaves), *P.* 'Tall Tails' (to 48", creamy long white flowers, blooms June through frost, strongest for Central Florida of the white flowered *Pennisetums*). Have a small space? Try *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum Compact' (to only 18" – perfect for the smaller border).

**Recommended references:**

- Grasses*, Nancy Ondra
- Ornamental Grasses*, Rick Darke
- Gardening with Grasses*, Michael King
- The Plantfinder's Guide to Ornamental Grasses*, Roger Grounds
- The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses*, John Greenlee

**Recommended Websites:**

- <http://www.forums.gardenweb.com/forums/grasses>
- <http://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/perpixog.html>
- <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/grasses/>
- <http://sudan.cses.vt.edu/html/Turf/ornglass.htm>
- <http://www.gramineae.com/plant.htm>
- <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/RG401.pdf>

**Recommended mail order sources:**

- [www.ornamentalgrassociety.org](http://www.ornamentalgrassociety.org)
- [www.gardencom.com/tornamental.html](http://www.gardencom.com/tornamental.html)
- [www.hoffmannursery.com/retailcat.shtml](http://www.hoffmannursery.com/retailcat.shtml)
- [www.limerockgrasses.com](http://www.limerockgrasses.com)
- [www.earthlypursuits.net](http://www.earthlypursuits.net)