



Ornamental Grasses in the Landscape

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Ornamental grasses have become very popular in landscapes because of their beauty and easy maintenance, but to avoid disappointment or frustration when using them, it's important to know how these plants grow. Grasses respond and start to grow based upon temperature – some will begin to grow in early spring when temperatures are still cool while others will wait until the soil is warm and temperatures are more stable.

Cool season grasses will start to grow in early spring and may even remain semi-evergreen over the winter. They also seem to do better and have better foliage when they are given sufficient water during periods of drought; if not watered during these times, they tend to go dormant which results in brown foliage. These grasses may also require more frequent division to keep them healthy-looking and vigorous. If not divided, they tend to die out in the center. For the ones that remain semi-evergreen, only the brown or winter-injured foliage should be cut out in the spring. Some of the more popular cool season grasses include Fescues, Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*), Tufted Hair Grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*) and 'Karl Foerster' Feather Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora*).

Warm season grasses will do better during warmer times of the year and remain good looking even when temperatures are high and moisture is limited. They do not begin to show new growth until the weather becomes stable and the soils warm. The previous season's growth usually browns out in the fall, requiring them to be cut back to about 2-4 inches in the spring. Examples

October 2, 2019

of some warm season grasses include Sea Oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), Japanese Silver Grass (*Miscanthus*), Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum*) and Switch Grass (*Panicum*).

The growth habit of grasses should also be understood. They can be either clump-forming or rhizome-forming. The former grows in very nice, neat mounds or clumps while the latter spreads by underground stems; some of these can become very aggressive and invasive, an example of which is Ribbon Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*). Japanese Blood Grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) is also rhizome-forming, but can be kept in check by cutting back on irrigation.

As with any other perennial, success depends greatly on soil preparation before planting and having good drainage. Fall is an ideal time to plant grasses because their roots can become established before freezing weather arrives. Incorporate ample organic matter into the soil before planting and keep moist until the rains arrive. Ornamental grasses do not require high amounts of fertilizer and, in fact, become floppy if too much is added.

To learn more about ornamental grasses and actually view some in the landscape, plan to attend the free public education class on October 5 at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden. The presentation will begin at 9 a.m. and will include demonstrations on planting, division, irrigation and care of grasses.

Save the date for “Fall into Gardening,” October 19. 9:00 am to 2:00 pm. Join us for many presentations, stay a half-hour or all day! Learn how putting your garden to bed now can pay big dividends next year; cool season planting, mulch and composting, and tool care are also covered. All 16 gardens are staffed and select fall plants are available for purchase (cash/check only). Refreshments and children’s activities, too!

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512, or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see <http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener> e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.