# Ornamental Grasses in the Garden

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Around this time of the year in the garden, many plants, especially perennials, may be looking pretty shabby and past their prime. One exception is ornamental grasses. Fall is when these plants really put on a spectacular display and give the garden one last blast before winter sets in. Ornamental grasses should not be confused with turf grasses used in lawns but are perennial plants in the *Poaceae* family. They are extremely easy to care for, are relatively pest and disease free and lend themselves to more informal and naturalistic gardens.

When buying an ornamental grass, it is wise to learn whether it is a "clumper" or a "creeper." Clumping grasses increase in size circumferentially over time and are generally what you want for a bed, border, or container. Creeping grasses are not as well behaved; they spread horizontally by either above-ground runners called stolons, or below-ground runners called rhizomes. Be very careful where you place these grasses as they can become invasive and often will take over an entire garden. Another consideration is the eventual mature size of an ornamental grass–some grow so large that it will be difficult to remove the plant or divide it. However, if there is space, these larger grasses make wonderful focal points or specimen plants. Of course, there are smaller grasses that make good edging or border plants.

Maintaining grasses is fairly easy. Plant them as you would any other perennial; this time of the year is perfect because the temperature is cooler and they have time to get established before the really cold weather sets in. Do not over-fertilize next spring, as too much nitrogen will contribute to weak, floppy foliage. Irrigation is best done by a drip system because overhead sprinklers tend to beat grasses down. As far as pests and diseases are concerned, probably the worst problem grasses sometimes exhibit is rust, which is caused by poor air circulation and overhead watering. However, this fungus usually disappears when the hot, dry days of summer arrive.

There are many, many ornamental grasses to choose from, but some that do very well in our area include Blue Fescue *Festucas* which are relatively small and make great border or edging plants; Feather Reed Grass *Calamagrostis acutiflora* Karl Foerster' which looks beautiful in massed plantings; Purple Fountain Grass *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum' which is considered an annual in our climate; Eulalia or Silver Grass or many of the *Miscanthus* varieties which make good specimen plants; and Bulbous Oat Grass *Arrhenatherum elatius bulbosum* 'Variegatum', another good edging plant. All of these give good fall and winter interest in your garden because of the slowly changing foliage colors. If you choose to use these plants or one of the many other grasses, you will not be disappointed.

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The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open weekly on Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. -noon, March through November. We do close when temperatures are above 95 degrees; please check our website for details https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Demonstration_Garden/

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard to answer your questions. Use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. or leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master gardener e-news.