Make Ornamental Grass Greener On Your Side Of The Fence

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Nov. 8, 2019

Before cutting grasses, distinguish between evergreen and deciduous grasses. Deciduous grasses will have turned a tan or brown color, indicating the tops of the plant are now dead. It is fine to cut back deciduous ornamental grasses at this time of year, prior to new growth showing up. Do not cut evergreen grasses such as blue oat grass (pictured) and fescues, as this can cause dieback or death of the plant. Clean up these grasses with a garden rake. (Photo: OSU Extension Service)

Q: When is the best time to cut back my ornamental grasses? I have several different types in my yard and I'm concerned about killing them if I cut them back too soon.

A: Ornamental grasses are one of the most beautiful and carefree plants in a landscape and take very little care. And if you are using native grasses, such as deer grass or fescue, they provide wonderful habitat for native insects and some birds.

To keep them looking good, ornamental grasses require cutting back at least once a year. You are not alone in wondering when to cut them back; many gardeners have the same concern.

Leaving the seed heads and grass stalks over the winter can provide food for birds and protection for overwintering insects. The dry grass seed heads can also add interest to the winter landscape. However, in some cases they can look untidy and you may want to cut them back sooner.

Depending on the type of grass — cool season, warm season or evergreen — the active growing time is different and the best time to cut them back changes.

Ornamental grasses. (Photo: Provided)

How to care for cool season grasses

Cool season grasses, such as Fescues, Blue Oat Grass, Tufted Hair Grass and Autumn Moor Grass put on most of their growth in spring before temperatures begin going over 75 degrees, and again in the fall when temperatures cool down, but do not drop below, 45 degrees. They generally maintain good color throughout summer but will not grow much when it's hot.

Cool season grasses should be cut back in early spring, but leave about one-

third of the plant in place. Trimming cool season grasses too severely can damage the plant, causing section of the clump to die. If these type of grasses look like they need to be rejuvenated it is better to dig them up and divide the clump into sections and replant then to cut them back to far.

How to care for warm season grasses

Warm season grasses, like Deer Grass, prefer warmer temperatures and do not begin growing until mid- to late spring, or even early summer. Their major growth and flowering occurs when it's hot, and usually turn shades of brown for the winter.

The best time to cut back warm season grasses is between late fall and late winter. These grasses turn shades of brown as the weather turns colder, and once this occurs, they can be trimmed back at almost any time. To minimize fire danger, warm season grasses can be trimmed to just a few inches above the soil line. If fire is generally not a problem, leaving the dried grasses and seed heads give winter interest, plus protect the crown from frost damage.

If these grasses are not trimmed until late winter, make sure to cut them back to just a couple of inches above the ground before new growth begins.

Besides Deer Grass, other grasses in the category are Fountain Grass, Miscanthus and Switch Grass.

How to care for evergreen grasses

Evergreen grasses can include grass like plants such as Mondo grass or the sedge, Carex pansa.

Evergreen grasses never go completely dormant and should not be cut back. If they start to look a bit shabby with some browning throughout the clump, just comb these areas out or cut out the dead stems.

With a little effort at the appropriate time, ornamental grasses can stay looking good for many years.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.