



## CA Native Grasses, Rushes and Sedges

by Patty Weeks, UC Master Gardener

This column recently highlighted two extremely large beautiful grasses, Pampas grass and Jubata grass. However both of these plants are considered invasive plants here in California and you may not want to plant them. Today we'd like to share information on three more restrained grasses and grass-like plants that we have growing in our demonstration garden along Mill Creek at the corner of Main Street and Fairway just west of downtown Visalia. While these plants do need to be trimmed back and divided every few years they are not considered invasive, are easy to care for and can be wonderful in our Central Valley gardens. From ground covers to dramatic accent plants most grasses are easy to grow and are usually disease and pest free.



DEERGRASS

**Ornamental grasses** have been gaining popularity over the past several years. Often used in native plant gardens along with succulents and cacti they are now being included in garden designs that showcase many flowering plants as well. The grasses create softness and movement within the garden. Their hues, often muted and natural, bring a relaxed feeling to the appearance of a garden and help the colorful flowers really stand out. Most are very drought tolerant after the first year.

We have three large **deer grass or *Muhlenbergia rigens*** in the garden and though they are planted as a group we keep them trimmed back so they do not touch each other. When planting, be sure to allow enough space for them to reach their full potential without crowding. The tightly packed arching shoots have such majesty when stirring in the breeze. Gray-green in color through most of the year in early summer the deer grass turn tan and form slender yellow spike-like flowering stems.



Sedge – CAREX Species

**Juncas or Rush**, also known as wire grass, is not actually a grass at all but a woody shrub that looks like grass. These plants are clumps of rigid upright slightly arching stems 1' to 3' tall. They love water and full sun but also adapt well to shadier dry spots. At this time of year they

have brown star-like bracts or flowers at the top of some stems. Native Americans used the entire plant in their basketry; the tan stems created the base of the basket and the black roots were used in the more intricate woven designs. These are best divided every few years to keep their size in check. Rush are lovely in a woodland garden. I recently planted three of these in my own front garden along a dry creek bed and love the vertical upright accent among the large softer ferns, columbine and Lily of the Nile. To keep them from spreading much I planted them within gallon containers directly into the ground.

**Sedges or *Carex*** are also not grasses, but clumps of stems that grow up to 2' tall and wide. They are evergreen and have small inconspicuous brown flowers. Sedge can fill a good size space in the garden and while garden books tell us they like full sun we find they are prettier with some shade. The blades seem to stay green and the plant is more compact. A couple of times a year we shear them back with hedge trimmers. Sedges are best planted 36" apart so they don't overlap each other. This is an excellent choice for erosion control if you have a troublesome slope or bank in your garden. We have transplanted sedge along the creek bank in this garden to help hold the soil in place. A new trend is to use sedges as grasses in meadow settings and we've seen examples of that at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. They can take a lot of traffic and be maintained by mowing or trimming with a string trimmer.

So there you have it; three "grasses" that are not invasive plants, drought tolerant, California native plants and well-adapted to the Central Valley. We will be having a class, open to the public, to show you how to divide, take softwood cuttings, and plant seeds from this garden to make more plants. Participants will take home free plant starts so watch for more information in this column in early September.

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