



## ORNAMENTAL GRASS CARE

UCCE Master Gardeners, Fresno County

In general, ornamental grasses require very little care.

Be sure specific grasses are planted in the proper area for that species -- such as shade loving grasses in shaded area, moisture loving grasses in moist area or in pots sitting on saucers of water.

Almost all grasses require little or NO fertilizer. Container plants should be fertilized occasionally because daily watering leaches out nutrients. Either slow release fertilizers (like Osmocote) or foliar feeding fertilizer (like Miracle Gro) work well. Drought tolerant grasses (like all Miscanthus and some carexes) should be fed only at the beginning of spring growth in February or March, after they have been cut back and/or divided. If fed more often (such as the way a turf lawn is fertilized), ornamental grasses just shoot up foliage and don't bloom much. Once established, these grasses can do without any fertilizer.

Container plants should be watered every day if temperatures are 85 degrees or higher. Below that temperature, every other day watering is sufficient. Drought tolerant grasses in the ground (once established), can be watered 1 or 2 times a week. Drip irrigation systems work well for all grasses.

Once a year, almost all of the drought tolerant grasses need to be cut back. All of the Miscanthus sinensis type grasses and the fountain grasses go dormant in winter. In late November or in December, their foliage turns beige in color and is dry. They are NOT dead and retain their architectural structure throughout the winter. At this point you have a choice -- leave them for structural appeal until spring, or cut them back. I prefer to leave them, as the dry foliage provides protection against frost to the roots and the later emerging new growth. In February, or in early March, I cut these dormant grasses back to about 4 to 6 inches in height, to allow the new growth to emerge. Some evergreen grasses, such as carexes, benefit from being cut back every few years. An electric or gas hedge trimmer works well for cutting the grasses.

This is also a good time to divide large grasses. About every third year, Miscanthus need dividing -- some of them start to die out in the center about that time. This provides a good point of division. The root mass can be very tough, so I use an axe to divide large ones. A sharp spade or machete will do the job on smaller root balls.

Ornamental grasses are rarely bothered by garden pests. Carexes in the shade may harbor snails, but are never damaged much by them.

In general, ornamental grasses are very low maintenance.