

Ornamental Grasses and Perennials

LOW-MAINTENANCE BEAUTIES

by Marc Gillotti



We all want a beautiful yard, with lots of color each season to accent our home's architecture and add curb appeal. Few of us have time for weeding, watering and the other maintenance issues that keep a fulltime garden looking its best though.

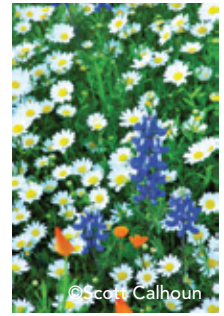
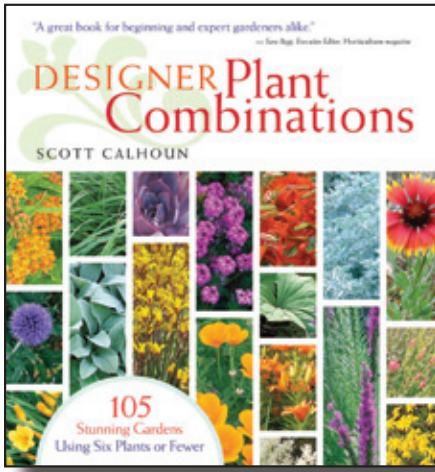
That's one of the reasons many Front Range landscape designers favor native ornamental grasses and perennials. They are hard to beat for their architectural effect, hardiness and easy care, as well as the year-round color, texture and form they bring to a garden.

Ornamental grasses are highly resistant to insect and disease problems and require very little pruning. Horticulturist Terry Carter of Designs by Sundown says "Grasses are low maintenance plants. They only require cutting in the spring to allow for new growth." They're also tolerant to heat and drought, which make them perfect for our climate. Dan Degush of Lifescape Associates says that "Once grasses are established, they require little to no watering. Grasses native to Colorado's climate will tolerate full sun conditions well. Some grasses, however, require lower light conditions and much more

constant water." He also says that "Most grasses require little upkeep. Grasses are deer resistant, so they can be used in properties on the city periphery or where deer tend to be."

History

Once used in Victorian gardens, ornamental grasses were abandoned for a more formal, manicured look. It was German horticulturalist Karl Foerster who re-introduced grasses into American and European gardens. His natural style of planting incorporated grasses and ferns with flowering perennials. They then fell out of vogue once again. Local landscape architect Tom Altgelt of Altgelt & Associates says that the modern re-popularization of perennials and ornamentals was sparked by Wolfgang Oehme. Tom learned his skill with these plants while working in Stuttgart which was a European center



for perennials and ornamental grasses.

Ornamental grasses are classified as either cool or warm season.

Cool season grasses do well before summer heat sets in and warm season grasses thrive in the heat. Ornamental grasses can sometimes be confused with similar looking plants like sedges, rushes or liriopes, but they are true grasses, belonging to the family of lawn and forage grasses, cereal grains, and bamboo.

Most ornamental grasses are perennials, living for two or more years. They give interest to the garden in ways that few other plants can; many have flowering heads that are very showy. They also grow to various sizes, with some reaching 10 or 15 feet while others are dwarf plants used as ground cover. Their rapid growth and changing appearance add seasonal interest throughout the year, but they add more than beauty to the landscape - they sway easily in the wind, creating movement and adding a gentle rustling sound for a tranquil effect.

Varieties and Proper Timing

Most gardeners recommend using a mix of warm and cool season grasses to your landscape, which will provide interest from spring to fall. Knowing which grasses are right for your yard, where to plant them and which flowering perennials will complement them is the expertise of a landscape architect. Carter explains that “grasses are used in most landscapes” and “they are the most effective plants to use for form and

texture in the garden.” “They can be used as specimen plants to make a statement or repeated through the garden for different texture and movement. Patterns are formed by the repetition of plants with strong outlines or colors. When they are ordered and linear they generate an atmosphere of formality, when random they produce a relaxed feel.”

Ornamental grasses and perennials are just like any other plant. Some work well in hot sun while others can withstand deep shade. There are also best times of year to plant- Algelt goes on to tell that “there are great combinations for different times of the year; for the Fall I like to combine golden yellow blooming Black Eyed Susan with purple Salvias and brick-red Autumn Joy Sedum along with various fall blooming grasses such as Maiden and Fountain grasses.”

Favorite Ornamentals

We asked our landscape experts in for their favorite varieties of ornamental grasses. You might spot a few of these low-maintenance beauties around town or in your own backyard.

Algelt says “perennials and ornamental grasses do very well in Colorado and vastly extend the range of plants and blooming time and variety of landscape and garden plantings. Perennials do very well in very high altitudes, where very few trees and shrubs grow.” While Degush adds “Grasses are best planted in the Spring or Fall. Most will last for several years, but will need annual care and maintenance to ensure new growth is healthy and crisp. Grasses do provide winter interest in that many turn a golden color and retain shape throughout the winter.”

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Japanese Silver Grass

This species may grow up to 10 feet tall. It flowers in late summer with large whisk-like flower plumes that range from reddish purple to silver.

Maiden Hair Grass

Feathery copper colored plumes cover this plant, which can grow to six feet, by mid-fall. The grass has beautiful green foliage during the summer months.

Pink Muhly Grass

Great for a hedge, border, or in patio containers this grass grows four feet high with showy pink plumes for color late summer into fall.

Switchgrass

This native grass grows six feet tall, comes in many varieties and gives excellent fall color with showy flowers as well as winter interest.

Mexican Feather Grass

This low-growing grass (one to two feet) is drought tolerant, easy to grow and grows like a cascading fountain.

Feather Reed

Vertical and tends to clump. Often uses around water gardens and areas that tend to flood. Flowering occurs in June and July.

Blue Fescue

Often used as accent and specimen plantings in the foreground of borders and in rock gardens.

Blue Oat

This is a clump forming cool season grass.

Zebra Grass

Noted for its showy, yellow and horizontal bands that gleam in the sun.

Mixing with Perennials

Ornamental grasses and perennials (plants who’s life cycle extends over several growing seasons) make for a perfect combination of carefree maintenance and visual interest for any garden. There are literally hundreds of options for shade and sun and everything in between.

A good resource is the book, Designer Plant Combinations, from Storey Publishing. The book is a visual wonderland of dozens of beautiful plant combinations, with ornamental grasses and perennials. Each garden profiled showcases just six or fewer plants, and the overall impact is stunning. ❖

RESOURCES

Algelt & Associates	303-516-1191	www.altgelt.com
Designs by Sundown	303-789-4400	www.designsbysundown.com
Lifescape Associates	303-974-6314	www.lifescapeassociates.com

