

# NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

February 12, 2024

## Ornamental Grasses Enhance Landscapes

Looking for landscape plants with multi-season interest, easy to grow, and pest and problem free? Ornamental grasses could be for you. With all the species available, both native and exotic, where does one start in making a wise choice for northern Wisconsin landscapes?

As with most landscape plants, start with hardiness. Our area is USDA Hardiness Zone 4a or 4b on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Winter hardy grasses come back strong every season. Popular species, including some native to prairies, are warm-season grasses. They are winter hardy but prefer warm weather before resuming growth in late spring. Non-hardy species, such as the popular purple and red fountain grasses, do not survive our winters but are attractive, easy to grow annuals for gardens and containers.

After hardiness, consider the growth habit of the grass species. Grasses may grow as neat clumps, or they may readily spread with rhizomes or stolons. Ribbongrass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) is an aggressive species to be careful with, as is blue lymegrass. Both have underground rhizomes that help stabilize soil, but they quickly spread and become invasive.

Most grasses need full sun to perform best. Grasses not getting enough sun tend to be spindly and thin. Soils do not need to be highly fertile but should have decent drainage.

Feather reed grass, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster,' is a widely planted hardy ornamental grass growing in strong, upright clumps with bronze flowers lasting for extended time periods. Chinese silvergrass, *Miscanthus sinensis*, is a large group with many cultivars. Most feature tall, arching growth habits with showy flowers and seedheads. Hardier popular cultivars include 'Purpurascens,' or red flame grass; and 'Silberfeder,' or silverleaf miscanthus.

Several native species make excellent landscape plantings. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) features erect clumps of arching blue-green foliage changing to reddish-brown fall color. Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) is much taller, with upright, open clumps of arching foliage. The turkey-foot flowers appear in late summer.

Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) is a native species with arching mounds of fine textured foliage along with open, airy seedheads in late summer. Side oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) has narrow, erect seed stalks with a single row of florets making this a unique and interesting plant.

These are among the better choices of ornamental grasses to consider adding to your landscape in 2024.

Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County? Feel free to contact:

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