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HOME-GARDEN

There are a wide variety of ornamental grasses to add to your home garden

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This time of year, I have a daily ritual on my walk from the car to my office. As I head up the curving entry path at New England Botanic Garden, I run my hand along the ornamental grasses that line the edges. Their varied textures — both in flowers and foliage — are just begging to be touched. There's something calming about that simple moment of connection with plants.

Ornamental grasses are excellent additions to the home garden. They offer texture contrast to broadleaf perennials and woody plants, provide graceful movement in the breeze, display showy blooms and fall colors, and require relatively little maintenance. These plants are versatile and resilient, making them the perfect garden companions.

Designing with Grasses

Ornamental grasses fall into two categories: cool-season (growing most in spring and fall) and warm-season (emerging in late spring or summer). When designing, think about when a grass will look its best — whether in bloom, during fall color, or offering winter structure — and how that aligns with other plants in your garden.

Grasses are surprisingly adaptable. Many thrive in poor, dry soil and full sun. Others prefer moist conditions, and some tolerate shade. From compact mounded types to towering structural specimens, there's an ornamental grass for every space. I like to use a little of everything in my own garden.

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Standouts for Every Garden

Short Grasses: ‘Blonde Ambition’ is a cultivar of blue gramma grass (*Bouteloua gracilis* ‘Blonde Ambition’) and my current favorite. Its fine-textured blades support short, horizontal white flower heads that float above the foliage — like little blonde eyebrows raised in surprise.

Undaunted® ruby muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia reverchonii* ‘PUNDO1S’) is a great short clumping grass. The flowers look like a red airy cloud enveloping the tidy mounded foliage in the autumn.

For cool-season options with bold color, I love blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*), which stays under a foot tall, and blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens* ‘Saphirsprudel’), which grows two to three feet tall. Both are semi-evergreen and provide winter interest in my garden.

Medium Grasses: Mid-sized grasses add structure and color without overwhelming the space. ‘Standing Ovation’ little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* ‘Standing Ovation’) has a tight, upright habit and excellent year-round appeal — blue-green foliage in summer turns bronze, red, and purple in fall and winter. Other great little bluestem cultivars include ‘Twilight Zone’ with silvery mauve tones, Smoke Signal® with deep purple fall color, and ‘Chameleon,’ which transitions from green and white variegation to pink and purple in autumn.

Tall Grasses: Tall grasses add drama and vertical interest. Look for self-supporting cultivars to avoid staking. The straight species of yellow prairie grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) tends to flop, but Golden Sunset® (‘MNYG31853’) is a sturdier cultivar and features golden flower plumes.

‘Blackhawks’ big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii* ‘Blackhawks’) turns from green to dark purple and is nearly black by fall. It tops out at over five feet. Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) is another strong upright option. While the foliage is about

three feet tall, its airy flower spikes can stretch to six. Try the cultivar ‘Heavy Metal’ for metallic blue leaves or ‘Northwind’ for steel-blue foliage that turns golden in winter.

Shade-Tolerant Grasses: Yes, grasses can grow in shade! For dry shade, bottlebrush grass (*Elymus hystrix*) offers narrow, rough-textured green leaves and flower heads that resemble — you guessed it — a bottlebrush. Another great option is Korean feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis brachytricha*), which has bright green leaves and soft, feathery flower plumes that catch the light beautifully.

Keeping Up Appearances Most ornamental grasses are low-maintenance. Clumping types should be divided every few years to maintain size and vigor, especially if the center starts to die out. Late winter to early spring, before new growth begins, is the best time to divide — just dig up the plant and slice it into sections with a sharp spade or saw.

Grasses are generally pest and disease resistant but can suffer fungal issues like rust or powdery mildew in crowded conditions. You can prevent this by giving them proper spacing and choosing resistant cultivars.

Whether you're designing for movement, texture, color, or structure, ornamental grasses bring elegance and ease to any garden. With so many varieties suited to different conditions, there's truly a grass for every gardener. Explore their beauty this season—you might just find a new favorite.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.