



Native Ornamental Grasses

by Kent County Master Gardener, Karen Abate

Native ornamental grasses can be a gardener's landscaping dream come true. Texture, sound, color, movement, and shade are all elements that native ornamental grasses can add to your home garden. In addition to being low maintenance, these grasses are a beautiful habitat for native insects, small animals, and bird populations. These are not the traditional green turf grass but, in fact, forms of grass-like plants that can grow upwards of 15 feet!



Wildflower.org Photo

Beachgrass From the Wasowski Collection.

Native plants are indigenous, and Delaware has several native ornamental kinds of grass. The plants are called ornamental because of their outstanding, showy characteristics. They are an excellent aesthetic accent to a garden.

Tips to add Native Ornamental Grasses

Some practical tips for adding native ornamental grasses to your landscaping plan include being mindful of the varieties and their growth patterns, including height, spread, foliage, sunlight, water, and soil conditions. The chosen area should preferably be prepped in the fall, but if this is not possible, spring cultivation works fine too. Adding compost or organic matter during site preparation is an important step. Ornamental grasses do not require high amounts of fertilizer. Grasses do not have to be trimmed for winter; the movement and color can continue adding visual appeal to the winter garden. Trimming of the foliage by 4 inches should occur in the spring, approximately 3 -4 weeks before the growing season begins. If not completed, this may inhibit growth.

Numerous species are native to Delaware but can be aggressive even when native. Grasses can be either clump-forming or rhizome-forming. The clump-forming grasses will grow in very nice, neat mounds or clumps. They tend to mix



Master Gardener Photo

Grasses for landscaping grow in clumps and mounds.

the warm season varieties. The native cool season grasses in Delaware include Short-Awn Foxtail, American Beachgrass, and Winter Bentgrass. These varieties grow early in the spring, and some may retain some color over winter. During droughts or when soil is dry, the cool season grasses can turn brown, indicating a dormant phase in the growth cycle. The Delaware warm-season grasses include Elliots Bluestem, Common Bushy Broom-Sedge, Indian Grass, Purple-Top Grass, Tall Switchgrass, Little Bluestem, and Big Bluestem. As the name implies, warm-season grasses grow well in warmer seasons, even when temperatures increase. Their growth will appear when the soil warms and temperatures even out.

well with other perennials and will not become aggressive. They will increase in girth slowly over time. The rhizome-forming grasses are spread by underground stems and can become very aggressive. These grasses have their place but may need to be in a well-tended perennial border since they can soon take over an entire area. Before selecting a grass, be sure to understand how it grows so you will avoid planting a future problem.

It is essential to note the difference between the cool season and

Maintain Healthy Grass

To maintain a healthy, happy ornamental grass plant, assessing the plant's overall health, visual appearance, and space should be considered. If you decide to divide the plant, this would be appropriate to complete in the spring before the growing season or in the early fall when that season has ended. Cool-season grasses tend to require more frequent division to maintain healthy appearances.

Author



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Imagination and space

Your imagination, needs, and space only limit native ornamental grass plantings. Some varieties grow well in pots, while others prefer more room. Season grasses can be a starting point and can be shared successfully with flowering perennials such as butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), New England asters (*Symphotrichum novae-angliae*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) or Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium dubium* or *E. fistulosum*) - to name just a few. Remember that these grasses are not the kind to be walked on. Instead, they bring an easy and excellent addition to your landscape design due to their height, texture, movement, sound, contrast, and color.

- American Horticultural Society (2022) Encyclopedia of Gardening Techniques, ISBN 13:9781784728113
- McAvoy, W.A. 2023. The Flora of Delaware Online Database. Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, Species Conservation and Research Program, Smyrna, Delaware.
- *Sorghastrum nutans* - North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/sorghastrum-nutans/>
- *Tridens flavus* - North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/tridens-flavus/>
- *Schizachyrium scoparium* - North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/schizachyrium-scoparium/>
- *Andropogon gerardii* - North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/andropogon-gerardii/>
- *Panicum virgatum* (Switchgrass) | Native Plants of North America https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=PAVI2#.YLcMErMlk4.
- Ornamental Grasses University of Illinois Extension | University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign | College of ACES; <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/grasses/default.cfm>
- Wisconsin Horticulture Division of Extension <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/little-bluestem-schizachyrium-scoparium/>

Delaware Cooperative Extension



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Questions

For questions on this subject or any gardening topic call the Master Gardener Helpline: In New Castle County, (302) 831-8862; in Kent County, (302) 730-4000; and in Sussex County, (302) 856-2585 x 535. The Master Gardeners monitor the Helpline in the winter but it may take a few days to get back to you.



For more information about Master Gardener workshops, garden helplines, presentations, becoming a Master Gardener Volunteer, or other activities, please visit these websites.

UD Website - <https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/environmental-stewardship/master-gardeners/>

DSU Website- <https://cast.desu.edu/cooperative-extension/agriculture-natural-resources/delaware-master-gardeners>

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Grasses for landscaping

Top right: **Little Bluestem**,
Norman G. Flaigg, Wildflower.org

Bottom right: **Indiangrass**,
Wasowski collection, wildflower.org

Bottom left: **Switchgrass**,
Strickland, wildflower.org

