

Ornamental Grasses for Every Landscape

By: Holly Mixon

Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent

University of Florida Indian River County Cooperative Extension Service

Lately, I have become very interested in grasses. And I am not talking about the turfgrass that we walk around on. As I continue to add plants to my own landscape, I fall more in love with Florida's native ornamental grasses. Ornamental grasses can add interest and a more natural look to any garden situation as they can be found in a variety of colors, textures, and heights.

One of the most admirable traits of ornamental grasses is that they are highly adaptable. Most of Florida's widely available varieties will grow in any soil conditions and are exceedingly drought tolerant. Therefore, they require very little effort to maintain once in the landscape. Even better, some of these native ornamental grasses produce seeds, which attract birds looking for food.

If you have a hot, dry site in your yard — and if you live in Florida, it's a safe bet that you do — purple lovegrass can make a beautiful groundcover. This drought-tolerant ornamental grass is fast growing and can reach a height of one to three feet. Purple blooms all year and the fine, wispy texture of purple lovegrass make this native plant a lovely landscape selection.

Muhly grass is another desirable native ornamental grass. Its rigid, upright growth habit makes it unusual compared to most other grasses. Reaching a height of up to five feet, muhly grass makes an outstanding accent plant or can be used effectively as a landscape border. This grass can tolerate both drought or flood and has a very high salt tolerance. The pink or purple flowers show up in fall and can be used in cut flower arrangements.

One of the things that I like most about ornamental grasses is how they seem to make a landscape look more natural. One great example of a naturalizing grass is panic grass. This plant is extremely drought and salt tolerant and has a rapid growth rate reaching from one to five feet. The tan flowers in the summer produce seeds that attract birds looking for a tasty snack.

Fakahatchee grass is yet another example of a desirable native grass. This plant can reach a height of up to six feet with about the same size spread! The flowers are not necessarily showy, but its resistance to pests and tolerance of wet or dry soil makes this ornamental grass worth a shot in the landscape.

For more information about ornamental grasses or other Florida native plants, contact the University of Florida/IFAS Indian River County Extension Service at (772) 770-5030.