

# Creating More Interest With Ornamental Grasses

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Wyoming landscapers and gardeners are using ornamental grasses more and more. They are extraordinarily resilient in our climate, and they add height, contrast and color to the garden year-round. In winter, they provide a magnificent backdrop to other plants and landscape features, softening the season's harshness when most perennials have gone back to being an unnoticed rosette of dried leaves at ground level. Further, ornamental grasses are some of the most wind-resistant plants. They can handle our Wyoming winds and still look like champions; some can even serve as miniature windbreak plantings for less wind-tolerant plants. When it comes to watering, most of these grasses require no more than a good soaking twice a month after they are established.

Here are a few ornamental grasses to consider in Wyoming:

1. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) is a native, clump-forming grass of the eastern plains of Wyoming. It breaks dormancy in late spring and develops a pleasant blue-green color as the summer heats up. The orange or pinkish red autumn color is particularly outstanding and is especially appreciated in the winter landscape. Height is 1 to 2 feet depending upon the amount of water given. This is one of the bunch grasses you see along the interstates this time of year in Wyoming, which has that reddish color.

2. 'Karl Foerster' feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora*) grows like a tower up to 4 feet tall and only 2-foot wide! The narrow green leaves are topped with wheat-colored blooms in early summer and remain that way throughout the winter. This is a very vertical grass. When planted together in larger mass areas, this makes quite a statement when there is a little breeze blowing. This grass really is showy in a little wind. Korean feather reed grass another selection has a much taller, feathery pinkish-gray flower heads, tolerates partial shade, and needs adequate moisture.

3. Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) has many cultivars to choose from. The grass foliage emerges in spring with ends tipped in red. In summer, the reddish-pink seed heads offer a dramatic backdrop to the garden. This is another grass which offers a most dramatic effect when planted in mass.

4. Northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), One of the best ornamental grasses for cut flowers, as its seedpods do not fracture when dried. This grass has a very showy seed head., and needs moderate watering.

5. Blue fescue 'Boulder Blue' *Festuca cinerea*, *F. glauca* - compact, very blue and heavy bloomer 'Elijah Blue' - powder blue variety 'Sea Urchin' - compact tufted shape. Small, blue to bright green clumps with tan to gold-toned seed-heads. Provide some supplemental water. Excellent for sands and not for heavy, wet soils. Divide often to renew.

These grasses do their best in full sun conditions. They require minimal care and very little or no fertilizer. In early spring, before new growth begins, cut back the grasses to 3 to 4 inches above the surface of the soil. Many other ornamental grasses will work in the landscape. Do not hesitate to contact a nursery professional in your area for recommendations.

The addition of ornamental grasses to a landscape really adds structure and texture not to mention a winter interest component to any landscape. These grasses really do a nice job as a back drop to smaller colorful annuals or perennials. They can also add as boundary to an area to subtly direct traffic towards another area or to draw your attention in a certain direction. These grasses are being used more often in landscapes and I encourage you to look into planting some in your yards because I have.

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