

ADD VARIETY TO YOUR GARDEN WITH ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Selecting Site-Appropriate Ornamental Grasses

Grasses have a wide variety of shapes and forms. Apart from their ultimate size at maturity, it is important that their desired shape, habit, and cultural requirements be determined before you plant.

Grasses are usually classified as clump-formers or spreaders. The various *Miscanthus* cultivars available are largely clump formers. This means they will stay put where you plant them, increasing in clump size over time like many other garden perennials. Clump formers are effectively used as individual specimens, or can be used in mass plantings. The genus *Phalaris*, on the other hand, is comprised of spreaders, and can quickly cover large garden areas by means of their aggressive underground rhizomes. These types of grass are best used when a ground cover is desired.

Grass shapes can be classified into six distinct forms. Among these are tufted, mounded, upright-erect, upright-divergent, upright-arching and arching (see diagram on back). The ultimate effect desired from the grass species selected may in part be determined by the shapes and textures of existing plants associated in a given landscape. Upright-erect grass forms (e.g., *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', *Panicum virgatum* 'Rehbraun') call attention to themselves; they compliment vertical lines in the garden. They can also help to blend strongly vertical architectural elements with the surrounding landscape.

Light exposure is also a prime consideration in choosing suitable ornamental grasses. Some species tolerate a great deal of sunlight

(e.g., *Chasmanthium latifolium*, most *Carex* species and cultivars) but actually prefer and grow better in more shaded areas. Others thrive in open, full-sun sites (e.g., *Festuca* species and cultivars) providing drainage is adequate.

Planting Ornamental Grasses

Contrary to popular belief, most ornamental grasses require only average soil to grow well. What is average soil? An average soil is one that has neither too much clay, nor too much sand. It is a soil that is neither too wet nor too dry for much of the year. Grasses grow most naturally in soils with average fertility. If supplemental fertilizer is added, do so only sparingly. A heavy hand with the fertilizer will stimulate grasses into rampant growth, which is normally not desirable.

Working in a little organic matter prior to planting will get most grasses off to a good start. Once established, most grasses are inherently drought tolerant. Some supplemental watering at planting time and throughout their first establishment season will ensure results with grasses. Since most grass species are grown in containers, their root systems remain largely intact when transplanting them into the landscape. Care must be taken at planting, however, to slice some of the roots on the outer surface of the root ball to stimulate rooting and hasten plant reestablishment.

Where and How to Plant

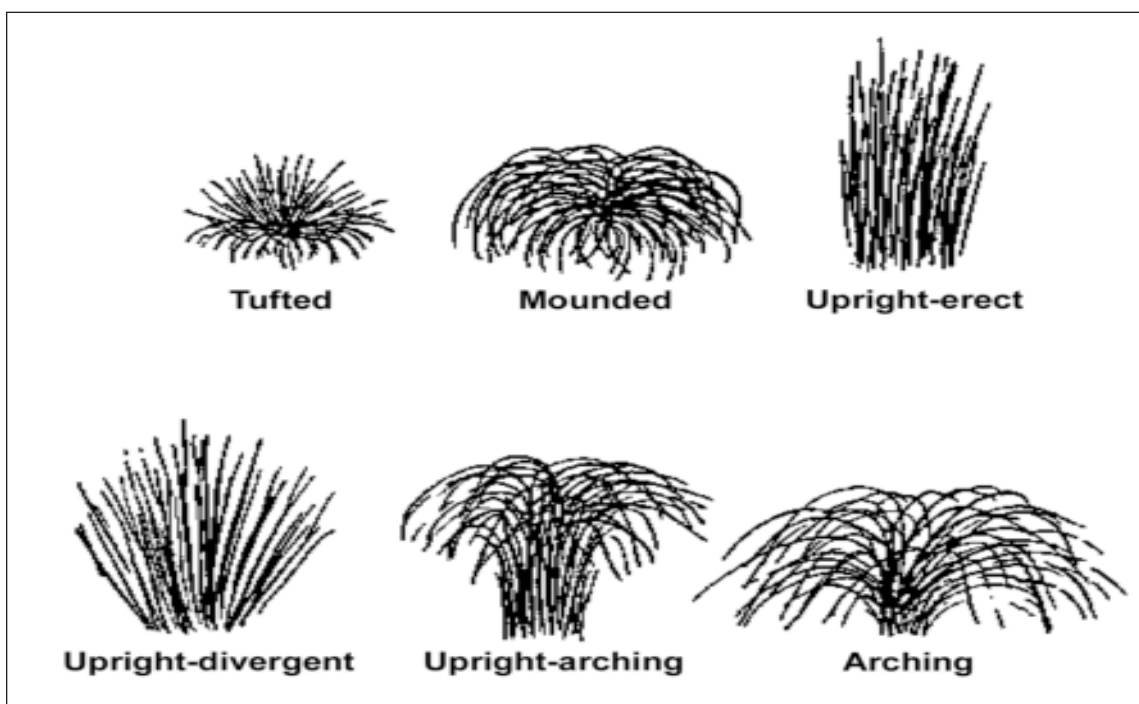
The beauty of ornamental grasses is the ease with which they can be incorporated into both new and existing landscapes. Grasses

are equally at home as massed plantings all by themselves or as specimen plantings inserted into existing herbaceous or woody plant beds. Grasses also work well around bodies of water, complimenting the natural and soothing feeling that comes from viewing water and extending it up onto dry ground. Planted as a mass, grasses create movement and interest for the eye and ear as well as flutter and rustle in the breeze. Around lampposts and other vertical structures, they call attention to both themselves and the feature they enhance.

A good rule of thumb to follow on plant spacing for grasses is to plant them as far apart as they will grow tall. You can also divide old plants to

increase their numbers or make more space. Cool season grasses—those that grow best during the cool days and nights of early spring and fall, (e.g., *Festuca* and its species and cultivars) – should be divided in the fall or early spring while warm season types – ones that grow best during the heat of summer, (e.g., *Pennisetum* and its cultivars) – should be divided in late spring after active growth resumes.

Dry shade to wet open meadow, you can find a grass to suit practically any landscape situation. All you need to succeed is a little enthusiasm, several different kinds of grass, and a desire to enjoy the fruits of your labor!



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