

Native Grasses for Your Garden

GRASSES ARE NOT JUST IN THE LAWN OR A GREEN TUFT ALONG THE ROADSIDE. Grasses are an important part of the ecological structure of many plant communities and provide great aesthetic interest in the garden. There are a wide variety of species that grow in a diversity of shapes, colors, growth habits, and conditions. While not often known for their flowering, some grasses do exhibit great seed heads that add further interest. Including them in the garden will provide habitat and food for a plethora of beneficial wildlife inhabitants.

Grasses are often a general term to describe the three major plant family types of “true” grass (*Poaceae*), sedge (*Cyperaceae*), and rushes (*Juncaceae*). Each are distinguished by a variety of anatomical differences in their flower and stem structures. A popular adage helps remember the differences as, “sedges have edges, and rushes are round, grasses have nodes from their tips to the ground.” Grass and rush stems are typically round or appear flat. Sedge stems can feel angular as silica lines run along the blade edges, giving a sharp feel. Grass stems contain swollen nodes or joints, while sedges and rushes do not.

Grasses are often described as two types that help us understand their seasonal growth—cool season and warm season. Cool season grasses often will actively grow and flower during the cooler temperature seasons, which is typically spring, then slow down as temperatures rise. Warm season grasses often will actively grow and flower during warmer temperatures, typically during the summer season.

Most grasses cultivated for the garden are clump growers and offsets grow outward from the mother plant. Grasses that grow by runners spread erratic distances away from the mother plant with underground stems or roots. These can be viewed as weedy in the cultivated garden setting.

Grasses can be mixed with other flowering perennials for textural interest. In such mixing, color, form and texture can help provide depth interest. The fine foliage of grasses, such as Pennsylvania sedge or prairie dropseed, provide soft texture that can be well matched with the coarser broad leaves of flowering perennial plants. In a meadow environment, grasses grow in a matrix along with flowering perennial plants that support tall stems and flower heads. This relationship can be mimicked in the garden by placing tall perennials adjacent to good companion grasses.

Mass grasses can be used as an effective groundcover, producing a swath or plain effect in the garden. Some gardeners have replaced cut lawns with uncut grass plantings, especially in areas that are not walked on.

We recommend checking out a reliable reference for cultivation requirements. We often find that garden cultivation closely relates to how grasses grow in their natural habitat. Some favorite references are William Cullina’s *Native Ferns, Moss, & Grasses* and Rick Darke’s *The Encyclopedia of Grasses of Livable Landscapes*, which includes both native and non-native grass descriptions. For a good identification book, check out Ted Elliman and Lauren Brown’s *Grasses, Sedges, Rushes: An Identification Guide*.

“Sedges have edges, and rushes are round, grasses have nodes from their tips to the ground.”

Favorite Native Grasses Popular for the Garden

BOTTLEBRUSH GRASS

(*Elymus hystrix*)—A great part shade plant that is often found on woodland edges or open tree gaps. What is fun about this grass is the seed head looks like a bottlebrush.

COMMON RUSH

(*Juncus effuses*)—Common in wet conditions along pond shores or slow-moving creek beds. This rush provides a sturdy clump of dark green, round leaf blades that taper to a point.

INDIAN GRASS

(*Sorghastrum nutans*)—This warm season medium to tall height grass is a great companion planting in the meadow garden. In late season it produces attractive feathery seed heads.

LITTLE BLUESTEM

(*Schizachyrium scoparium*)—Popular for its blueish color foliage, this grass is a nice medium size warm season grower. The native specimens are typically found in dry, poor soil conditions, which will flop over when cultivated. There are now many new cultivars that provide good upright stature for our gardens.

NORTHERN SEA OATS

(*Chasmanthium latifolium*)—An upright medium height grass that grows well in part sun to light shade. The seed heads resemble oats that dance gently in the wind. Be careful, as this grass will seed around to become thick patches.

PRAIRIE DROPSEED

(*Sporobolus heterolepis*)—A full sun grass that grows in a low mound shape with fine textured leaf blades. In the fall the plant diffuses a faint odor that some say smells like cilantro or fresh cut straw.

PURPLE LOVE GRASS

(*Eragrostis spectabilis*)—This unassuming, almost common weedy-looking grass will suddenly explode with a bright fuzzy flush of pink flower plumes later in the season. Often can be spotted along sunny roadsides in well-drained soils.

SEDGES

(*Carex spp.*)—Cool season woodland sedges have become very popular garden plants. A common favorite is Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*) with fine texture and bright green leaf blades. There are some wider leaf blade sedges that provide interesting textures such as plantain-leaf sedge (*Carex plantaginea*). The wide blades have a folded appearance like that of seersucker fabric. Other species have blueish coloring to their leaf blades.



Plantain-leaf Sedge
(*Carex plantaginea*)

Common Rush
(*Juncus effuses*)

Northern Sea Oats
(*Chasmanthium latifolium*)

