

Top Ten Ornamental Grasses for your Garden

Christine Ffoulkes Jones of Hall Farm Nursery counts down her personal hit-parade



People often ask me ‘What is your favourite plant?’, which of course for any gardener is a difficult question to answer. We have so many “favourites”, don’t we? Perhaps it is something that grows well in our own garden and gives us a long season of interest – like *Verbena bonariensis* for me. Or for my husband it’s the fleeting beauty of *Sanguinaria canadensis* ‘Flore Pleno’ with the most exquisite flowers each one lasting hours rather than days.

But I can be sure that if there is one group of garden plants that gives me great pleasure, it is the ornamental grasses.



“...attracted by the ornamental grasses I have to stop or at least linger a moment for closer inspection of this picture of everchanging beauty”

Photo: Christine Ffoulkes Jones

There is something about the way their leaves and flowers waver in the air, beckoning the attention of anyone passing by. Each time I walk through my nursery in late summer and autumn, I am attracted by the ornamental grasses and have to stop or at least linger a moment for closer inspection of this picture of everchanging beauty. The flowers seem to transform their hues as the sunlight falls upon them throughout the hours of the day. On rainy days the flowers can bow over from the weight of moisture and then resurrect, with beads of moisture holding on and glistening in the light. On breezier days the movement is more intense and the sounds created by the some of the larger grasses introduce an extra sensory dimension into the garden. Even without our gardens, we are in contact with grasses throughout our lives. We love to sit on a grassy bank for a picnic or take walks in the countryside surrounded by grasses and sedges.

Through my decades of professional gardening I have grown a great range of the commercially available grasses. In the early days I made mistakes – for example by planting *Phalaris arundinacea* ‘Picta’ in my herbaceous border. This plant is commonly known as ‘Gardeners Garters’ and it is perhaps the one grass that sadly puts off more people growing grasses than any other. It has strong creeping roots and spreads quickly, taking over other less vigorous plants. But non-the less, its’ handsome striped foliage can be used to good effect in large container schemes. Remember that adage ‘right plant, right place’ – as gardeners we aspire to that day when all our plants are in the ideal place.

I see my top ten selections as the tip of the iceberg, I could easily make it my top 100 but that would be a book. I have chosen some well-known plants that many of you will already grow and some are lesser known. They are chosen for their long-lasting beauty, structural form lasting through winter months, ease of growing and well-mannered habit.

And in at number 10 is *Hakonechloa macra* ‘Aureola’. Many grasses like an open sunny spot, but this is one which is happy in at least partial shade. It forms distinctive rounded mounds of tumbling golden foliage thinly striped with green. It is at home at the front of a woodland border or excellent in containers. It slowly grows year by year, eventually being big

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enough to fill a stately home sized container. If you have trouble remembering or pronouncing its name then use my pet name for it 'Hack 'em off lower'....it will also help you to prune it...in February do precisely that!

At number 9 is *Calamagrostis brachytricha*. Known as Korean Feather Grass. 4 to 5ft high in flower it forms a clump of loose, glossy green leaves and plumes of purple-tinged sprays of flowers in late summer and early autumn. It remains upright and attractive through until spring.

For the children we have number 8. *Lagurus ovatus* 'Bunny's Tails'. I include this annual grass in my list because if you grow a batch of these from seed this spring you will be sure to tap into the imagination of someone young or young at heart. Within weeks you will have neat little clumps of soft grassy foliage, topped with furry bunny tail flower heads. Collect your own seed for future plantings. The flowers also dry very well too for floral art work.

Number 7 is one of the many *Miscanthus - sinensis* 'Morning Light'. This sturdy clump forming perennial attains a height of 5 to 6ft with its fine silvery variegated foliage. It is quite slow to start but left undisturbed it steadily increases to form an eye-catching accent plant. It looks stunning against a dark background.

At 6 it is *Pennisetum alopecuriodes* 'Red Head'. Some *Pennisetums* are prolific self-seeders, but not this one. It is a politely mannered perennial which thrives in an open sunny position. Striking dark bottlebrush flowers spray out of the compact mounds of foliage from midsummer onwards. They remain on the plant standing well throughout the worst of winter weathers – including snow. Also, the flowers are good for cutting, a virtue of many ornamental grasses.

In at 5 it's *Cortaderia selloana*, the Pampas Grass. Many of us will remember how popular this plant was in 1970's front gardens, where it left little room for anything else. If you have a small garden there are dwarf forms available such as 'Pumila', but if you do garden on a larger scale then the Pampas Grass is a bold and impressive garden plant.

At 4 it's *Stipa tenuissima* or Pony Tail Grass. Growing about 18" tall in flower, it is useful in borders, containers and gravel gardens. Admire it early in the season with its fine fresh verdant feel, then in summer as it starts to flower neat and upright and into late summer when the flowers erupt into clouds which billow in breeze. See it at dawn on a summer morning, heavy with early morning dew from a cool night and the effect is surreal and eerie.

Number 3 is *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' Widely used in landscaping schemes, especially on traffic islands on the continent, it is more than worthy of a place in the finest gardens. It has a very strong upright habit and I like to describe it as taking up the space of a slim 5 to 6ft high person standing in the garden. It is a great accent plant and works well as a single specimen or in mass plantings.

At 2 is the subtle beauty of *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw'. As the name suggests it is a native of the North American Prairies. Forming strong clumps 4 to 5ft high, with dainty airy panicles of flowers in late summer and autumn. These flowers seem to reflect the colours of surrounding plants, whether it is the powdery blue of *Aster* 'Little Carlow', striking yellow of *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii* or strong mauve of *Verbena bonariensis* – all of which associate perfectly with this grass.



"*Hakonechloa macroa* 'Aureola' is happy in at least partial shade."

Photo: Christine Ffoulkes Jones



"*Calamagrostis brachytricha* is known as Korean Feather Grass."

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"*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' is a great accent plant."

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And still at number 1 after so many years it is *Stipa gigantea*. Often called Giant Oat Grass it stands 5 to 6ft high in flower, with its heads of open golden oat-like flowers. I have seen it thriving in almost all types of soil – from light sands to heavy, claggy, even wet clay. Just give it an open sunny spot and it will take care of itself for many years. I recently found my grandfather's RHS pocket diary from 1965. In the back was a list of recommended ornamental garden grasses and there was *Stipa gigantea* – 50 years later it is still at the top.

This top 10 includes some of the well-known genera but there are so many more that you could choose. Once you get swayed towards growing grasses you will be whisked along on a delightful journey with them.

You will soon get the hang of the cultivation and maintenance. There are a few basic guide lines. The most important is never cut your grasses down in the autumn. Many grasses are deciduous (they lose their colour in the autumn, but continue to stand up in the garden until spring), these ones we can cut down right to the ground in February or March. Other grasses and many of the sedges (*Carex*), are evergreen or semi-evergreen, (these keep their colour during the winter months), these are the ones we don't cut down but tend to tidy up or comb through with our rubber gloved hands in the spring. Incidentally, if you want to know an easy way to distinguish between a grass and a sedge then run your closed finger and thumb carefully along the wide surface of the leaf...the sedge blade is triangular and will not feel like a flat surface. "Sedges have edges!".

I hope this article will inspire you to try some different grasses in your own garden this year.

Why do I love ornamental grasses so much? The answer my friend is blowing in the wind.

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