

# THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



## GRASSES GALORE

Ornamental grasses and grass-like plants are an outstanding way to add texture, unique form, and year-round interest to a landscape. Available in many shapes, sizes, colors, bloom time, and site condition preferences there is one for every gardener and every garden. Like all plants, it is important to select the right species according to the site conditions and aesthetic preferences to achieve best growing results.

## SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS

In terms of landscape aesthetics, grass-like plants, such as sedges and rushes, are often lumped in with true grass species. This tradition continues here. Growth habits of grasses are often categorized as clumpers or runners. Clump forming plants increase size in girth while generally staying in the same place. This characteristic makes them appealing species for landscape beds. Conversely, runners can spread rapidly through rhizomes or stolons. Runners can cover large areas of ground which can be advantageous or problematic depending on the desired result.

In addition to growth habit, grasses and grass-like species are categorized as cool or warm season based on when active growth occurs. Cool season grasses grow well in temperatures from near freezing to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. In upper Illinois, this means these plants thrive during spring and autumn, often going dormant during summer heat. Warm season grasses wait for warm summer days to break dormancy and thrive in 80-90 degree Fahrenheit days.

Grasses and grass-like species are relatively easy to care for when the right species is chosen according to site conditions. Two of the most common maintenance activities required for grasses



Fountain grass





is cutting back and dividing. Cutting back is the annual removal of the previous year's growth and is usually done in late winter or early spring just before plants begin growing again. To cut back, remove all but 3-4 inches of the previous year's growth.

Dividing can help rejuvenate plants that are showing signs of center dieback and should be done in spring or late summer. Dividing can be a bit of a challenge so a sharp shovel or spade can ease the work. To divide, dig the plant up, cut into sections, discarding the dead center, and replant new sections.

### Mnemonic Device for I.D.

Sedges have edges,  
rushes are round,  
grasses have knees  
that bend to the ground.

## SPECIES TO CONSIDER

### Side Oats Grama

The common name of *Bouteloua curtipendula* references the appearance of the inflorescence, a delicate spike of oat-like seed. A fine textured plant, the blooms are prolific throughout the summer and early autumn. Fall foliage colors range from purplish red to bronze to orange hues. It is lovely as a specimen plant but can create a stunning display when planted in mass.



### Little bluestem

*Schizachyrium scoparium* is tricky to pronounce but a must have in the garden. Little Bluestem forms a tight clump of fine foliage reaching two to four feet tall. Summer foliage is blueish green with hints of purple teasing what is to come. Autumn foliage and blooms complement each other in colors of dark copper-red and silver.



### Indiangrass

A nice native substitute for the commonly planted Karl Forester Feather Reed grass, *Sorghastrum nutans* is a majestic giant at up to seven feet tall. Showy flowers emerge in late summer and persist throughout the autumn. Indiangrass inflorescence are a lovely addition to cut flower arrangements. Foliage turns bright orangish-yellow as autumn progresses. Strong stems are able to withstand weight of light snowfalls for persistent winter interest..



### **Prairie Dropseed**

Native to Illinois prairies, *Sporobolus heterolepis* is as beautiful as it is durable. Incredibly fine textured leaves form dense mounds of glossy green. Although slow growing, Prairie Dropseed rewards the patient gardener with deep root systems that support drought tolerant plants that are long lived, and tolerant of most soil profiles. Orange to light copper autumn color is a bonus.

### **Fountain Grass**

The only annual on this list, *Pennisetum setaceum*, is a great way to incorporate grasses into your landscape without commitment. Fountain grass will grow three to five feet tall and can have hues of purple in the foliage and flowers. This easy to grow grass prefers full sun or part shade and well-drained soils. Grow it in the landscape or a large planter.

### **Sedges**

A broad family of more than 3600 species, sedges are often well suited for areas with consistent moisture. *Carex* spp. is the largest species group of sedges and offers an abundance of ornamental options. Flowers are often an insignificant aesthetic consideration as compared to form and foliage. Although there are hundreds of species, *Carex pensylvanica* is a native favorite and can create a beautiful, natural ground cover in sun or shade.

## **CAUTION**

Not all ornamental grasses and grass-like plants are made equal. There are a few species that are quite attractive but pose a major threat to natural ecosystems. These plants demonstrate invasive characteristics and are not recommended. A few to avoid include Reed Canary Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) When obtaining grasses for the landscape, purchase from a reputable nursery and identify the species correctly prior to planting.

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## **OUTSIDER ACTION**

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider:

- Go on an ornamental grass scavenger hunt, find all of the grasses identified here.

#### **Photo citation**

"150823 28 Hudson River Park - near Perry St, indian grass *Sorghastrum nutans*, *Lantana camara* cv, *Echinacea* sp" by cultivar413 is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>.

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