



go native with Ornamental Grasses

Hailing from the high plains and prairies to stream banks and woodland edges, native American grasses provide evocative charm to any landscape.

BY C. COLSTON BURRELL

'Shenandoah' switchgrass is particularly effective when sited so that its inflorescences are backlit by morning or evening light, as shown in this planting at VanDusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver, British Columbia.

GRASSES EXEMPLIFY elegance. Purity of form, sensual texture, sound, movement, and quiet color all contribute to their allure. Victorians adored their many fine qualities, but ornamental grasses fell out of favor after the turn of the 20th century. A resurgence of interest in grasses for American landscapes came in the 1990s with the pioneering work of the Washington, D.C.-based landscape architecture firm Oehme, Van Sweden & Associates, whose work popularized grasses, as well as a blousy, painterly approach to design.

Today, a renewed interest in America's diverse native flora is drawing well-deserved attention once again to these versatile plants, not just for meadow plantings and habitat restorations, but in home landscapes as well. This is reflected in the fact that a number of landscape architects and designers, including Larry Weaner in Pennsylvania and John Greenlee and Bernard Trainor on the West Coast, have shifted away from the transplanted European aesthetic, which incorporated primarily Eurasian species such as maiden grass (*Miscanthus* spp.), fountain grass (*Pennisetum* spp.), feather-reed grass (*Calamagrostis* spp.), purple moor grass (*Molinia* spp.), and fescues (*Festuca* spp.).

A transition to using native species is also significant from an ecological perspective. Over time, several of the Eurasian species have become invasive in North America, escaping cultivation and compromising native ecosystems (see box, page 30).

DESIGN LEARNING CURVE

With the Eurasian species, designers and gardeners got used to taking a one-grass-fits-all approach. But for native grasses, proper siting within landscapes is key to their success. Species such as Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), for example, initially were disparaged for being overly floppy. But if we take a cue from their wild habitats and use these plants in dry sites with moderate to low soil fertility, they will excel.

Here are a few excellent native grasses to consider adding to your garden. Most are suited to sunny sites, but I've included a couple of shade-tolerant species at the end. (For additional native grass selections, see chart, page 31.)

GRASSES FOR SUNNY SITES

Ragged, club-shaped heads of **bushy beardgrass** (*Andropogon glomeratus*, USDA Hardiness Zones 5–10, AHS Heat Zones 10–1) give the effect of a feather duster topping the stiff stems above basal tufts of thin, arching blades. The plant grows wild in low open woods, margins of ponds and marshes, wet pine savannas, and roadsides throughout much of the



The inflorescences of tufted hairgrass are at peak color in early summer.

United States. Try it in informal settings such as at the edge of a pond or other wet spots where few other plants thrive. Designer and native grass expert John Greenlee of Brisbane, California, says it is

“an underused accent for its showy seed-heads and reddish fall-winter color.” It does best in full sun, growing two to four feet tall and up to two feet wide. Established plants form dense, multi-stemmed clumps that slowly creep outwards.

Though **tufted hairgrass** (*Deschampsia cespitosa*, Zones 4–9, 9–1) is familiar to many grass aficionados, few realize that it is native to North America as well as Europe. This graceful grass can be found in bogs and wet meadows across southern Canada and the northern United States, as well as throughout the West. It produces 12-inch-tall clumps of arching evergreen foliage topped by airy golden inflorescences in early summer. A cool-season species, it will not tolerate drought or prolonged hot weather and may go semi-dormant after flowering. Site in full sun or light shade.

The featherlike plumes of **Lindheimer muhly** (*Muhlenbergia lindheimeri*, Zones 6–10, 10–3) appear on five-foot-tall stems above thin, spreading, semi-evergreen blades that droop at the tips, forming a fine-textured vase. The plumes mature from purple-brown to pale tan. The cultivar ‘Lenli’ has yellow autumn plumes. Greenlee considers it “one of the best flow-



Pink muhly (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) is a show-stopper in late summer and early fall, when its fountainlike plumes of airy pink flowers burst into view—as seen here in a naturalistic planting at Chanticleer Garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania.

ering grasses for the American Southwest, Texas, and California,” but it is adaptable to cultivation well beyond its native range, even in the humid east. Plants are drought tolerant but quickly succumb to water-logging, so give it a well-drained loamy or sandy soil in full sun or light shade.

Pink Muhly (*M. capillaris*, Zones 6–9, 9–3) is also drought tolerant like Lindheimer muhly and prefers similar cultural conditions, but its native range comprises dry open woods, barrens, and rocky slopes in the Southeast and lower Midwest. This spectacular clumping species measures three feet tall and wide. Its gray-green blades form a fine-textured skirt for the rosy-red plumes that create an airy spherical crown above. ‘Lenca’ has deep rose-pink inflorescences. ‘White Cloud’ has ivory plumes.

Sources

High Country Gardens, Denver, CO.

www.highcountrygardens.com.

Las Pilitas Nursery, Santa Margarita, CA.

www.laspilitas.com.

The Natives, Davenport, FL.

www.thenatives.net.

Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC.

www.plantdelights.com.

Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN.

www.prairiemoon.com.

Resources

The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes by Rick Darke, Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2007.

Native Ferns Moss & Grasses by William Cullina, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY, 2008.

The airy, beaded inflorescences of **switchgrass** (*Panicum virgatum*, Zones 4–9, 9–1) are held above the gracefully arching foliage on thin but stiff, leafy stalks. Spring foliage may be red-tinged, and in autumn plants turn rich russet to burgundy. Plants are adaptable to drought and wet soil but grow best in full sun. It can be found on prairies and dunes, in meadows and open pine woods, and along the edges of freshwater marshes throughout most of North America.

“The switchgrasses are incredibly versatile,” says John Hoffman, owner of Hoffman Nursery in Greensboro, North

Carolina. “Their upright habit makes them good accent plants. Use several in a mixed planting to establish a visual rhythm and tie the planting together. They’re also very strong in a mass planting.”

Clumps vary in stature from three to eight feet tall and four to five feet wide. ‘Cloud Nine’ grows to seven feet with diaphanous heads and gray-green leaves on wiry stems that may flop in wind and rain. ‘Northwind’ has upright, five-foot stems clothed in wide, deep green leaves. ‘Shenandoah’ reaches four feet and has rich burgundy fall color.

Tufts of arching blades that turn russet to burgundy in autumn make **sugarcane plumegrass** (*Saccharum giganteum*, Zones 6–9, 9–5) a standout in any setting. This gorgeous clumping grass with a spreading

vase of wide blades and culms to 10 feet tall bears billowing plumes that open red and mature to silver. Found in meadows, open woods, and along roadsides in eastern and central United States, this grass is drought tolerant and moderately tolerant of water logging. Place it in loamy or sandy soils in full sun or light shade.

Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*, Zones 3–8, 8–1) is “a grass that fills the moment,” says Roy Diblik, owner of Northwind Perennial Farm in Burlington, Wisconsin. “As we develop our varied plant patterns and look to create the rhythm of the planting, the growth rate and habit of *Schizachyrium* are just right in relation to most plants, producing a bridge between different patterns.” Plants begin growth in summer, and the silvery seeds are prominently dis-



The upright habit and blue-green foliage of little bluestem provide a good foil for brightly colored perennials such as coneflowers, as seen here, and black-eyed Susans.



Statuesque Indiangrass, above, provides a show with its erect flower stalks starting in midsummer and stretching into winter. Left: In contrast, the airy, fragrant plumes of prairie dropseed arch gracefully from compact tufts of basal foliage.



(*Sorghastrum nutans*, Zones 4–9, 9–1) stand like one-sided flags atop erect or arching stems above dense clumps of spreading blades that droop at the tips. Mature clumps to six feet tall bear many culms and may measure three feet wide. Plant in full sun or light shade, in loamy or sandy soil; rich soil causes plants to develop weak stems that flop in wind or rain. These drought-tolerant plants are found in dense stands in meadows, prairies, glades, and roadsides throughout eastern and central North America and the Southwest.

Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*, Zones 3–8, 10–2) is “a great connector grass, creating continuity within the planting,” says Diblik. Its long, threadlike blades form dense tufts with one- to three-foot arching plumes of fragrant flowers appearing in

played late in the season on burgundy or golden stalks. “The fuzzy flowers along the stems reflect the changing light of day, sparkling within the garden,” says Diblik.

This upright clump-forming grass grows one to three feet tall and one to two feet wide. Plant it in sandy or loamy, well-

drained soil, in full sun or light shade. Its deep, water-seeking roots hold the soil and impart excellent drought tolerance. It grows wild in meadows, prairies, roadsides, dunes, and fields from Maine and Quebec to Alberta, south to Florida and Arizona.

Silky golden plumes of **Indiangrass**

summer. The fragrance, likened to the scent of peaches or buttered popcorn, originates from a sticky substance that coats the inflorescence. “The soft arching flowers in mid-August are the highlight of this grass,” says Diblik. “Then as the days go by, the foliage changes to a golden yellow.”

Found in prairies, meadows, barrens, and roadsides throughout eastern and central North America, this grass shows good drought tolerance. It does best in full sun or light shade, and “has a very forgiving nature as far as soil conditions,” says Diblik.

GREAT GRASSES FOR SHADE

Grasses that tolerate shade are few and far between, but one good choice is **wood or riverbank oats** (*Chasmanthium latifolium*, Zones 4–9, 9–1), with graceful stems to three feet, loosely clad with wide, blunt leaf blades. The wiry stems droop at the tips, presenting flattened, oatlike inflorescences.

Suitable for a shady site like this one under a ‘Bloodgood’ maple, wood oats forms clumps of foliage topped in late summer by dangling oatlike seedheads that move with the wind.

Grow as a mass under the light to medium shade of trees, or as an accent at the middle or rear of a bed in average to rich, moist soil. Wood oats can tolerate a wide range of exposure from full sun to dense shade and can reseed prolifically on open ground. It is native to low woods, along shaded stream banks, and in floodplains from the mid-Atlantic to the southern Great Plains.

Aptly named **bottlebrush grass** (*Elymus hystrix*, Zones 3–9, 9–1) is another grass for shade. Linear foliage ascends the stem from a tufted winter rosette. The erect, sparsely clothed, three-foot-tall stems bear terminal inflorescences that resemble kitchen bottlebrushes. The seeds shatter early, leaving bare stalks in late summer, with foliage turning yellow in autumn. Adaptable to sun or shade, plants grow best in average to rich, moist soil, but do not compete well with other vegetation, and may be short-lived. It can be found in open woods and floodplains throughout eastern and central North America.

DESIGNING WITH NATIVE GRASSES

Our wealth of North American grasses has virtually unlimited landscape poten-



NATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO INVASIVE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

When choosing alternatives to invasive exotic grasses, consider the outstanding attributes for which the grass is grown: foliage texture, plant form, or inflorescence shape. Remember that a grass native in one region of North America may be invasive in another. For instance, Mexican feathergrass (*Nasella tenuissima*) is native in Texas and New Mexico, but can be invasive in California. —C.C.B.

Invasive Grasses

Arundo donax
Cortaderia selloana, *C. jubata*

Imperata cylindrica
Miscanthus sinensis

Pennisetum alopecuroides

Native Alternatives

Arundinaria gigantea
Saccharum giganteum or *S. brevibarbe*,
Muhlenbergia lindheimeri
Chasmanthium laxum, *Andropogon glomeratus*
Saccharum alopecuroides or *S. brevibarbe*,
Panicum virgatum ‘Northwind’,
Panicum amarum ‘Dewey Blue’
Sporobolus heterolepis, *Nasella tenuissima*

MORE NATIVE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Name	Height*/ Spread (ft.)	Ornamental Characteristics; Cultural Information	Origin	USDA Hardiness, AHS Heat Zones
<i>Andropogon ternarius</i> (Split-beard broomsedge)	3/1–1½	Short leafy bracts, silvery plumes atop wiry stems; drought tolerant	East and South U.S.	5–10, 10–1
<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i> (Sideoats grama)	3/1–2	Tight clumps of basal foliage with one-sided inflorescences along stems; adaptable, drought tolerant	North and South America	3–10, 10–1
<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i> (Blue grama)	1/1½–2	Fine-textured, gray-green leaves, flattened flower heads look like tiny combs; drought tolerant	Upper Midwest and West, Canada	3–10, 10–1
<i>Chasmanthium laxum</i> (Slender wood oats)	2½–3½/1–2	Slender, arching stems topped by delicate arrowhead-shaped seedheads; part to deep shade, moderate drought tolerance	Southeast U.S.	6–9, 9–2
<i>Elymus canadensis</i> (Canada wild rye)	2–5/2–3	Cool-season grass, with green to blue-green leaves and greenish flowers; may reseed	North America	3–8, 8–1
<i>Eragrostis elliotii</i> 'Wind Dancer' (Elliot's lovegrass cultivar)	2–3/2–3	Slender arching stems, blue-green leaves, topped with frothy white inflorescences; drought tolerant	Southeast U.S., Central America	6–10, 10–1
<i>Koeleria macrantha</i> (June grass)	2–2½/½–1	Dense cushion of foliage bears brushy flowers in spring; ideal for rock gardens and green roofs	U.S., Eurasia	3–9, 9–1
<i>Muhlenbergia rigens</i> (Deer grass)	4–5/4–6	Bunch grass with narrow leaves and silvery arching inflorescences; heat and drought tolerant	South and Southwest U.S., Mexico	6–10, 10–4
<i>Sporobolus airoides</i> (Alkalai sacaton grass)	3½–4/2	Warm-season bunch grass with narrow gray-green leaves and lacy, pinkish seedheads; heat and drought tolerant	Western U.S., Mexico	4–9, 9–4
<i>Sporobolus wrightii</i> (Big sacaton)	5–6/3–4	Narrow gray-green leaves and airy plumes; tolerates drought, salt, and alkaline soil	Southwest U.S., Mexico	5–9, 9–3

*Height includes blooms

tial. Groundcover plantings, specimens, flamboyant patterned masses, erosion control plantings, restored meadows, and even container displays are all part of the ever-expanding potential.

Designers and gardeners today interweave grasses into the fabric of plantings, the grasses being the warp and flowering perennials the weft. From a distance, the powerful presence of the grasses holds the eye. On closer inspection, the intricacy and diversity of the planting is revealed, much as it is in a meadow or prairie landscape where grasses dominate the matrix. When we take grasses out of the naturalistic plantings to which they are often relegated, juxtaposing them with hard edges and strong geometry, the gauzy, natural forms snap both into sharp focus.

One additional sign of aesthetic maturity in the use of grasses is realizing that they can play a subordinate role in the landscape. They do not have to be front-and-



The arching inflorescences of bottlebrush grass are showy in early summer.

center as specimens or massed in sweeping patterns. Instead, they can make a design statement when used to set off other landscape features, such as the form of a tree, a

sculpture, or the architecture of a home or garden structure. They also blend well in the middle or back of a bed or border as a backdrop to a rich floral tapestry.

The real power of native grasses lies in their ability to evoke a strong sense of place. In country gardens, they echo seasonal changes of the surrounding landscape, from the verdure of spring to the russet of summer and autumn. In urban and suburban gardens, native grasses reestablish a regional aesthetic and bring some of the beauty of wild lands to our daily experience.

So take a second look at native grasses. They deserve a permanent, if not preeminent place in the garden designer's repertoire. Their textures and luminescence will captivate the spirit, delight the eye, and reconnect us with our local landscapes. ☪

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