

Gardeners are discovering the pleasures and benefits of landscaping with ornamental grasses. Once established, most of these plants are maintenance and pest free. Generally, grasses perform well in sandy soil and variable pH ranges. Many will tolerate everything from extreme drought to occasional flooding. Native grasses have had to become adapted to our fickle Floridian fluctuations.

Ornamental grasses are very diverse in growth habits. Some are spreading ground covers less than six inches tall, and others become eight foot upright clumps of stiff leaves. Some are evergreen, and others die back in the winter. The foliage color of a plant may be different in the summer than in the fall, and the flower color can be quite spectacular.

The two main types are clumping and spreading. The clumping type will simply increase the diameter of the clump each year and you can divide them down in three or four years. Spreading types will grow out in any direction from the original plant which makes them valuable as ground and bank covers.

You can imagine how many different uses that grasses could have in the landscape when you consider all their possible characteristics. Stiff, upright grasses make a bold statement and contrast well with rounded, fine textured plants. Masses of soft and wispy grasses will flow gracefully in the breeze and bring movement to large, open areas. Single plants with vibrant fall color will certainly add some warmth to a lifeless fall and winter landscape.

As their popularity grows, more diverse species are becoming available commercially in garden centers. Great grass selections, many of which are native to northern Florida, can be found in mail order and online catalogues.

One locally available ornamental grass, purple Muhly grass, is one that you may want to start growing today. This tough, clumping native grass grows upright to three foot and has wire-thin leaves. Muhly grass tolerates drought and extended flooding, acidic and alkaline soil, and it grows well in sand and sun. Dark pink blooms seem to float above the foliage in the fall. For such a tough plant, this grass adds a bit of gentle charm to any setting.

To learn more about native ornamental grasses, talk to the UF Master Gardeners at the fair, or visit <http://wfreq.ifas.ufl.edu/Subsites/OrnamentalGrasses> *(Published 10-30-11)*