



GREEN SPRING GARDENS

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RECOMMENDED HARDY ORNAMENTAL GRASSES AND SEDGES FOR GARDENS IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA

Ornamental grasses and sedges are an exciting addition to gardens. These tough yet beautiful plants give gardens a more natural look and are valued for their fine texture and myriad variations of form, size, and color. Ornamental grasses are also valued for their graceful movement and the soothing sound that the rustling of their leaves and stems provides. They have a long season of interest - fresh green tufts in the spring, feathery flowers in summer and autumn, and welcome structure with soft brown, golden, or reddish hues in the winter landscape. In addition, native grasses and sedges provide invaluable food and cover to birds, butterflies, and other wildlife.

True grasses are members of Poaceae, the grass family, but many plants that resemble grasses are actually sedges. Cyperaceae is the sedge family. The recommended plants are hardy herbaceous perennials (plants that form little or no woody tissue and live for three or more years).

The following are useful definitions:

- Cultivar (cv.) – a cultivated variety designated by single quotes, such as ‘Variegata’. A **variety (var.)** or **subspecies (subsp.)**, in contrast, is found in nature and is a subdivision of a species.
- Full shade – the amount of light under a dense deciduous tree canopy or beneath evergreens.
- Full sun - 6 hours or more of sunlight daily. Most ornamental grasses need full sun.
- Naturalistic use – native plants that, when properly sited, perform well with minimal care; best used in an informal design that suggests a natural landscape. Most native species can be used this way, and this is the best way to use some species with informal growth habits or species that reseed readily. For grasses and sedges this often means meadow plantings.
- Part shade – the amount of light in an area shaded part of the day, among deciduous trees with high branches, among deciduous trees with foliage that is not heavy, or among thinned deciduous woods.

The following species are good garden plants for the Washington, D.C. area. Most of them form clumps rather than spreading by aboveground or underground stems as turf grasses do. The few spreading types that are listed spread slowly enough to be suitable for gardens. Most ornamental grasses prefer full sun and moist sites, although a few species are very drought tolerant or prefer some shade. Most of the sedges listed here prefer some shade and moist sites. Grasses and sedges that need to grow in wet sites are not included. Light requirements are noted in the comments column, as well as special cultural requirements and tolerances. It is also noted if a plant is evergreen or semi-evergreen. **Species that are native to Virginia are marked with an asterisk (*) and highlighted in red.**

NON-NATIVE AND NATIVE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i> *	River Oats	Full sun to part shade; reseeds readily in moist sites so best for naturalistic use
<i>Elymus hystrix (Hystrix patula)</i> *	Bottlebrush Grass	Light shade to part shade; tolerates dry sites; some reseeding; best for naturalistic use due to informal look
<i>Hakonechloa macra</i> 'Aureola' & 'Albovariegata'	Golden-variegated Hakone Grass White-variegated Hakone Grass	Best in light shade to part shade in moist, rich soil; 'Albovariegata' is more tolerant of sunny sites
<p><i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> cultivars with low seed viability (the species itself is invasive in moist natural areas):</p> <p>Suitable for most sunny gardens:</p> <p>'Morning Light' (medium-sized grass with white variegation; fine-textured foliage)</p> <p>Large cultivars (not for small gardens):</p> <p>'Strictus' (yellow variegation & intermediate texture)</p> <p>&</p> <p>'Cabaret' (coarse-textured foliage with a wide band of white variegation)</p>	<p>Morning Light Miscanthus</p> <p>Porcupine Grass</p> <p>Cabaret Miscanthus</p>	<p>Full sun; very drought tolerant</p> <p>The larger cultivars are harder to divide over time (eventually the plants get very wide & need to be divided):</p> <p>'Strictus' (tall plant but not as wide as the following)</p> <p>&</p> <p>'Cabaret' (wide plant but not as tall as 'Strictus' – the most difficult to divide)</p>
<i>Molinia caerulea</i> cultivars such as 'Skyracer' & 'Transparent'	Purple Moor Grass	Full sun; do not crowd - far less impact from blooms
<i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i> *	Pink Muhly, Pink Hair Grass, Purple Muhly	Full sun in well-drained sites; very drought tolerant

<p><i>Panicum virgatum</i>* & cultivars - the best include: 'Dallas Blues' - large plant & blue foliage 'Heavy Metal' - vertical accent with blue foliage; great for smaller gardens 'Northwind' - taller vertical accent than the above cultivar & green foliage 'Rotstrahlbusch' - intermediate in size 'Shenandoah' - one of the shortest cultivars if true to type – propagate by division rather than seed to get true form</p>	Switch Grass	Full sun; tolerant of wet soils; very drought tolerant; larger cultivars like 'Dallas Blues' are best in drier sites to limit flopping
<p><i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i> ('Cassian' & 'Hameln') <i>P. orientale</i></p>	Hardy Fountain Grass Hardy Oriental Fountain Grass	Full sun; black-flowered cultivars like 'Moudry' reseed too readily Full sun
<p><i>Saccharum brevibarbe</i> var. <i>contortum</i> (<i>Erianthus contortus</i>)* <i>S. giganteum</i> (<i>Erianthus giganteus</i>)* <i>S. ravennae</i> (<i>Erianthus ravennae</i>) Note: ravenna grass causes contact dermatitis in some individuals</p>	Bent-awn Plume Grass Sugarcane Plume Grass, Giant Plume Grass Ravenna Grass	Full sun in dry to moist sites; best for naturalistic use – reseeds readily & more informal than the following Full sun in moist to periodically wet sites; reseeds readily but showier than the above This non-native likes full sun in drier sites to minimize flopping; very drought tolerant
<p><i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>* ('The Blues' – light blue foliage but needs sandier, dry soils to minimize flopping)</p>	Little Bluestem	Full sun; very drought tolerant; light reseeding in gardens
<p><i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>*</p>	Prairie Dropseed	Full sun; best for naturalistic use – subtle beauty; very drought tolerant

Native grasses primarily for naturalistic use in meadows in full sun:

*Andropogon gerardii** (big bluestem) is a tall grass that is long lived but often floppy in moist soils. It is very drought tolerant.

*Andropogon ternarius** (splitbeard bluestem), *A. virginicus** (broomsedge bluestem), & *Eragrostis spectabilis** (purple lovegrass) are shorter grasses. These grasses tend to be short-lived in gardens, need excellent drainage (especially *A. ternarius* & *E. spectabilis*), & are very drought tolerant.

*Sorghastrum nutans** (Indiangrass) is a tall grass that is long-lived in gardens but reseeds readily. It is very drought tolerant and adaptable to various soils.

*Tridens flavus** (purpletop) is intermediate in height & reseeds readily. It is very drought tolerant.

A gorgeous native grass that can be short-lived if not given constantly moist to wet sites in full sun (works well in gardens and naturalistic settings): *Andropogon glomeratus** (bushy bluestem).

NON-NATIVE ORNAMENTAL SEDGES

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Carex conica</i> 'Marginata' (also called 'Variegata' or 'Snowline')	White-variegated Sedge	Light shade to part shade; evergreen; fine-textured
<i>Carex dolichostachya</i> 'Kaga Nishiki' (Gold Fountains is the commercial trade name; gold variegation) <i>C. morrowii</i> cultivars – the best include: 'Goldband' 'Silk Tassel' (also see as var. <i>temnolepis</i> but not recognized by botanists) 'Variegata'	Gold Fountains Sedge Goldband Sedge Silk Tassel Sedge	Light shade to part shade; semi-evergreen to evergreen; fine-textured Light shade to part shade; evergreen; 'Silk Tassel' is a fine-textured sedge with narrow white variegation; the other two cultivars have a coarser texture
<i>C. siderosticha</i> 'Variegata' (white variegation)	White-variegated Morrow Sedge Creeping Variegated Broad-leaved Sedge	Light shade to part shade

NATIVE ORNAMENTAL SEDGES

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Carex grayi</i> *	Gray's Sedge	Light shade to part shade in consistently moist sites; naturalistic use best – can be short-lived in some locations & need to allow reseeding
<i>C. pensylvanica</i> *	Pennsylvania Sedge	Full sun (moist sites) to part shade; semi-evergreen; naturalistic use because spreads readily
<i>C. plantaginea</i> *	Plantainleaf Sedge	Light shade to full shade; tolerates dry sites in rich soil; semi-evergreen to evergreen

<i>C. shortiana</i> *	Short's Sedge	Light shade to part shade in consistently moist sites; likes calcium in the soil (add lime or gypsum when planting)
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A note about scientific names:

Current names are from the **International Plant Names Index** (IPNI; www.ipni.org/index.html) and/or the **USDA PLANTS Database** (<http://plants.usda.gov/>; this website also has many photographs of native plants). If a second scientific name is given, it is usually an old name that is still seen in some references or used by some nurseries. The **Missouri Botanical Garden** is also an excellent reference for plant names, gardening information, and photographs: the **Kemper Center for Home Gardening Plantfinder** features plants in their Kemper Center display gardens and is one of my favorite websites about ornamental plants (www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/alpha.asp). Another resource is their plant name database for plants throughout the world at **w³TROPICOS** (<http://mobot.mobot.org/W3T/Search/vast.html>).

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