



GREEN SPRING GARDENS

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NATIVE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES AND SEDGES - FOR THE WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA -

Native ornamental grasses and sedges are tough yet beautiful plants. They are valued for their natural look, fine texture, and graceful movement. 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. In addition, they 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 ‘Standing Ovation’. A **variety (var.)** - or **subspecies (subsp.)**, in contrast, is found in nature and is a subdivision of a species.
- 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, or for the restoration of native plant communities.
- 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 perform well in the Washington, D.C. area and most are grown in groups. 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, although a few species prefer some shade. Most of the sedges listed here prefer moist to wet sites. Light requirements are noted, as well as special cultural requirements and tolerances. Most listed grasses and sedges are native to Virginia: blonde ambition blue grama is the one exception in this information sheet.

Meadow Gardens and Meadows

Grasslands are natural communities dominated by native perennial grasses and sedges. Wildflowers and woody plants are also found in these communities. Grasslands in Virginia are mostly found in places with extreme environmental conditions or are maintained by disturbances such as fire or infrequent mowing such as under power lines. Enthusiasts of naturalistic design and wildlife may want to develop meadow gardens or meadows, which are designed versions of grasslands in the moist climate of the eastern United States. Meadows are cut down or mowed every year or two in order to keep them from reverting to woodland (burning can be used in less developed areas). Some of the sunny areas in the Virginia Native Plant Garden at Green Spring were inspired by grasslands, as were two meadow gardens in the Entrance Garden with both native and non-native plants.

NATIVE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES FOR GARDENS

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<p><i>Andropogon virginicus</i></p> <p>Note: <i>A. gerardii</i> (Big Bluestem) - better behaved in drier sites (very drought tolerant). Had to remove from a meadow garden in good soil because it outcompeted little bluestem (<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>).</p> <p><i>A. glomeratus</i> (Bushy Bluestem) – can be short lived if don't site properly but beautiful - likes constantly moist to wet sites.</p>	<p>Broomsedge Bluestem</p>	<p>Full sun for all species.</p> <p>Broomsedge bluestem is longer lived in drier soil – let it reseed since likes to pop up here and there.</p>
<p><i>Elymus hystrix (Hystrix patula)</i></p>	<p>Bottlebrush Grass</p>	<p>Full sun (moist areas) to part shade; tolerates dry sites; some reseeding. Nice for naturalistic use due to informal look but well behaved enough for gardens.</p>
<p><i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i></p> <p>('White Cloud' has white blooms that flower late – Florida germplasm. More for specialized design use than routine use.)</p>	<p>Pink Muhly, Pink Muhly Grass, Hair-Awn Muhly</p>	<p>Full sun in well-drained sites; drought tolerant. Keep the showiest plants & divide them to increase numbers.</p> <p>'Pink Flamingos' is a hybrid between the eastern native & a western species (<i>M. lindheimeri</i>) – it is a taller plant (personally prefer <i>M. capillaris</i> in most landscapes).</p>

<p><i>Panicum virgatum</i> & cultivars - the best cultivars include: ‘Heavy Metal’ - vertical accent with blue foliage; great for smaller gardens</p> <p>‘Northwind’ - taller vertical accent than the above & green foliage</p> <p>Ruby Ribbons (‘RR1’) – some foliage is purplish</p> <p>Newer cultivars are being tested such as ‘Apache Rose’ (upright habit & shorter than ‘Northwind’) & ‘Cheyenne Sky’ (some foliage is deep wine red starting in the summer & persists for some time).</p> <p>‘Dallas Blues’ is large plant selected in Texas with blue foliage. It is difficult to divide or to dig out after it has been growing for several years.</p>	<p>Switchgrass</p>	<p>Full sun; soil adaptable & most forms are tolerant of dry sites. Lowland forms are tolerant of wet sites (upland & lowland ecotypes are found in nature).</p> <p>Had to remove ‘Northwind’ plants & seedlings from a meadow garden with good soil because seedlings outcompeted little bluestem (<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>).</p> <p>Shenandoah’ had low vigor in dry to average sites over time & eventually died out in various locations in our area.</p>
<p><i>Saccharum brevibarbe</i> var. <i>contortum</i></p> <p><i>S. giganteum</i></p>	<p>Bent-awn Plumegrass, Sortbeard Plumegrass</p> <p>Sugarcane Plumegrass, Giant Plumegrass</p>	<p>Full sun in dry to moist sites; reseeds readily & more informal than the following.</p> <p>Full sun in moist to periodically wet sites; reseeds readily; showier than the above</p>
<p><i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i></p> <p>An excellent blue-foliaged cultivar in our region is ‘Standing Ovation’. Blue Heaven (‘MinnBlueA’) has performed well in Minnesota & testing in our region.</p>	<p>Little Bluestem</p>	<p>Full sun; very drought tolerant; some reseeding in gardens.</p> <p>The species type is beautiful (green foliage until autumn).</p>

Note: *Bouteloua gracilis* ‘Blonde Ambition’ (Blonde Ambition Blue Grama) - superior to the species in our area & a good garden plant. The species is native to the central & western U.S. -
The native side-oats grama (*B. curtipendula*) is not as showy. -

Sporobolus heterolepis (Prairie Dropseed) – only some forms have been vigorous at Green Spring (in the Entrance Garden). Prefers dry soil & slow to establish. Keep best forms. The blooms can have a pleasant fragrance (described as having hints of coriander, cilantro, and/ or popcorn). -

Native Grasses Suitable For Naturalistic Use Such as Meadows or Woodlands

(Available in the nursery trade as seed or plants. Tolerant of dry sites. Many more grass species are native to natural areas.)

**Chasmanthium latifolium* (River Oats) - full sun to part shade. Aggressive reseeding in moist sites.

A species with less vigor for shaded areas is *C. laxum* (Slender Woodoats; the local organization Earth Sanga has propagated & sold this species in the past).

**Elymus canadensis* (Nodding Wild Rye) - tolerates some shade. Used for soil stabilization & wildlife. Other

species that are commercially available include *E. riparius* (Riverbank Wild Rye) & *E. virginicus* (Virginia Wild Rye). -

**Panicum clandestinum* or *Dichanthelium clandestinum* (Deer-Tongue Grass; botanists cannot agree on the name) – full sun to part shade. For restoration plantings in woodland & riparian areas. Often seeds itself into beds not far from natural areas. -

**Sorghastrum nutans* (Indiangrass) – full sun. Reseeds readily into other plantings in garden settings & difficult to remove from the crowns of other perennials. -

**Tridens flavus* (Purpletop, Purpletop Tridens, Redtop) – full sun. Reseeds readily & has short rhizomes. -

Note: Have not found the right habitat for *Eragrostis spectabilis* at Green Spring (Purple Lovegrass; a beautiful grass in nature). -

NATIVE ORNAMENTAL SEDGES FOR GARDENS

(Available in the nursery trade as plants. For shady areas.)

Scientific Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Carex grayi</i>	Gray's Sedge	Needs consistently moist sites; can be short-lived in some locations so allow reseeding.
<i>C. plantaginea</i>	Plantainleaf Sedge	Tolerates dry sites; wide leaves that are puckered.

Note: *C. pensylvanica* (Pennsylvania Sedge) can be used in mass as a no-mow lawn substitute in shady areas. It is not a low maintenance plant in garden beds with many other herbaceous plants since it tends to outgrow them.

There are many other sedge genera, and some are common garden weeds such as yellow nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*; native & non-native forms but cannot tell apart).

Native Sedges for Naturalistic Use in Moist to Wet Conditions (available in the nursery trade).

Species include:

Carex crinita (Long-Fringed Sedge) - pendulous, catkin-like flower structure

Carex stricta (Tussock Sedge) - clump forming in standing water but will run in drier soil

Carex vulpinoidea (Fox Sedge)

Scientific Names Of Plants - Current Names Are From:

- **Encyclopedia of Life** (<http://eol.org/>) – institutional partners include Harvard University, the Missouri Botanical Garden, the Smithsonian Institution, and The Field Museum.
- **Tropicos** from the Missouri Botanical Garden (<http://tropicos.org/>)

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. However, the above databases do not always agree on names.

Other References:

- **Digital Atlas of Virginia Flora** (<http://vaplantatlas.org/index.php?do=plant&plant=2394&search=Search>). Species distribution maps by county and photos of many plants.
- **The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes.** Rick Darke.
- **Flora of Virginia.** Alan Weakley, J. Christopher Ludwig, and John Townsend. 2012. BRIT Press. Botanical Research Institute of Texas.
- **Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change.** Larry Weaner and Thomas Christopher. Meadows and a more naturalistic style of gardening are emphasized.
- **Kemper Center for Home Gardening Plantfinder.** Missouri Botanical Garden. An excellent reference for plant names, gardening information, and photographs of ornamental plants (<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx>). It features plants in their Kemper Center display gardens.
- **Landscaping With Native Plants.** Maryland Native Plant Society. - (<http://www.mdflora.org/resources/Publications/GardenersGuidelines/Landscaping-Natives.pdf>).

- **The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden.** Rick Darke and - Douglas Tallamy. -
- **Maryland Plant Atlas** (<http://www.marylandplantatlas.org>). Species distribution maps by county. Also **Maryland Biodiversity Project** (<http://www.marylandbiodiversity.com/>) – look for checklists under **Plants** & photos of many plants.
- **Minnesota Wildflowers. A Field Guide to the Flora of Minnesota.** Excellent side-by-side photos of native plants grouped by category. Most plants are also native to Virginia (<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/>).
- **Native Plant Information Network.** Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Information about native plants throughout the U.S. (<http://www.wildflower.org/explore/>).
- **Native Plants for Northern Virginia** (<http://www.plantnovanatives.org/>). It is a publication of the Plant NoVANatives initiative, which includes the Virginia Native Plant Society.
- **Planting in a Post-Wild World: Designing Plant Communities for Resilient Landscapes.** Thomas Rainer and Claudia West. A design approach that explores how to create & manage designed plant communities. For more advanced gardeners.
- **USDA PLANTS Database** (<http://plants.usda.gov/java/>) - this database focuses on plants native to the U.S. and to U.S. Territories and Protectorates, as well as naturalized non-natives and invasives. It is also used to determine distribution within Virginia by county.

Detailed Information about Meadows and Meadow Gardens:

- **Grasslands - Native Plants for Conservation, Restoration and Landscaping.** Lists native grassland plants for Virginia. Natural Heritage Program of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/documents/grass_nat_plants.pdf).
- **Five Steps to Successful Prairie Meadow Establishment.** Neil Diboll. Prairie Nursery - (<http://www.prairienursery.com/prairie-nursery/neil-diboll/documents/five-steps-to-successful-prairie-establishment.pdf>). -
- **Urban and Suburban Meadows. Bringing Meadows to Big and Small Spaces.** Catherine Zimmerman.

Invasive Plant Species:

Virginia Invasive Plant Species List. Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (<http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/invspdflist>). Some non-native grasses and sedges are a serious threat to natural areas and native plant communities.

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