

**Harlequin's Gardens**  
**Sustainable Nursery & Garden Center**  
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## **Care of Ornamental Grasses**

Ornamental grasses add grace, movement, and textural contrast to gardens of many styles and settings, from informal to formal, native to exotic, sunny and dry to shady and moist. They can be effective in the landscape or garden for many months and are especially valuable for their presence in the winter landscape. Ornamental grasses are usually long-lived and easy to care for.

When planting ornamental grasses, mix compost and an organic fertilizer such as Yum Yum Mix with the backfill that you return to your planting hole. Each spring, broadcast or lightly scratch in a light dose of organic fertilizer. Water requirements will depend upon which grasses you are growing, what your soil composition is, and the exposure of your site.

The only other maintenance to be done for ornamental grasses is to cut down the dead foliage and flower stalks at the correct time. The correct time will be determined by whether the grass species is a 'Cool Season Grass', a 'Warm Season Grass', or an 'Evergreen Grass'.

**Cool Season grasses** make their growth during the cool weather in spring and fall (mostly in spring). They generally send up flowering stalks in May or June. Therefore, they should be cut back to 4-6" tall in February (in the Boulder/Denver area) to make room for new growth. The following are Cool Season ornamental grasses for our area:

Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Avalanche' (Avalanche Variegated Feather Reed Grass)  
Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Karl Foerster's' (Karl Foerster's Feather Reed Grass)  
Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Overdam' (Overdam Variegated Feather Reed Grass)  
Calamagrostis brachytricha (Korean Feather Grass)  
Chasmanthium latifolium (Northern Sea Oats)  
Deschampsia caespitosa (Tufted Hair Grass)  
Harpochloa falx (Caterpillar Grass)  
Molinia caerulea variegata (Variegated Moor Grass)  
Nassella tenuissima (Mexican Feather Grass, Ponytail Grass)  
Oryzopsis hymenoides (Indian Rice Grass)  
Sesleria autumnalis (Autumn Moor Grass)

**Warm Season grasses** begin growing when temperatures are warmer, and make most of their foliar growth in April, May and June. They generally send up flower stalks in late summer. Many Warm Season grasses develop beautiful fall or winter color. Warm Season grasses should be cut down to 4 – 6" tall in early April. The following are Warm Season ornamental grasses for our area:

Andropogon gerardii (Big Bluestem)	Pennisetum alopecuroides, all varieties (Fountain Grass)
Andropogon saccharoides (Silver Beardgrass)	Pennisetum orientale (Oriental Fountain Grass)
Bouteloua curtipendula (Side-oats Grama)	Saccharum ravennae (Plume Grass, Hardy Pampas Grass)
Bouteloua gracilis (Blue Grama)	Schizachyrium scoparium (Little Bluestem)
Eragrostis elliotii 'Wind Dancer' (Wind Dancer Love Grass)	Sorghastrum nutans (Indian Grass)
Eragrostis trichodes (Sand Love Grass)	Sporobolus airoides (Alkali Sacaton)
Miscanthus sinensis (all varieties) (Maiden Grass)	Sporobolus heterolepis (Prairie Dropseed)
Panicum virgatum (all varieties) (Switchgrass)	Sporobolus wrightii (Giant or Wright's Sacaton)

There are just a few **Evergreen ornamental grasses** suitable for our climate. They generally make most of their growth early in the season, along with the cool season grasses. They send up flowering stalks in spring. These should not require any pruning, but can be sheared back in February for renewal every few years. The following are Evergreen ornamental grasses for our area:

*Festuca glauca* (all varieties) (Dwarf Blue Fescue)

*Helictotrichon sempervirens* (Blue Oat Grass, Blue Avena )

When cutting back a clump of ornamental grass, first gather the stalks and foliage together and tie with twine, rope or bungee cord. You will be cutting below the place where the bundle is tied, at about 4”to 6” above the ground. The best tool is a sharp pair of hedge-shears. Because the dry foliage is bound by a cord, it won’t make a mess in your garden or blow away. It can be easily transported to your compost pile, or to your shredder, where it can be chopped up for mulch.