

## Ornamental Grasses

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Driving down SR 520 on Merritt Island over the weekend, I noticed that the Muhly grass was in bloom. It is very striking in a mass planting which they have done in the median just east of Sykes Creek. On the drive back, heading west, the Muhly grass was even more striking because the sun set off the colors so well. Ornamental grasses are a wonderful addition to the landscape because they don't require a lot of care and many of them have attractive plumes.

Of the ornamental grasses used throughout Florida the most commonly used one would probably be pampas grass. I have noticed many places where pampas grass is blooming now also. Pampas grass also makes a great barrier because the foliage has saw toothed margins so that if you are working in them or trying to walk through them they will give you tiny little cuts which will start burning once you start sweating. So, where long sleeves and pants if you will be working in or around them. Pampas grass can grow 6-10 tall and loves a location that receives full sun. The large plumes can get 12-18 inches tall and usually appear starting in mid-summer. It can tolerate poorly draining soil and brief flooding. The dried flower heads are highly prized by some.

*Muhlenbergia capillaris* (Muhly grass) is a native grass which produces dense, clumps that can grow two to three (and possibly 4) feet tall. Beautiful purple plumes, which are produced in autumn, are held above the thin leaves. It can be planted in locations that are full sun or partially shady. Muhly grass makes an attractive mass planting so plant them two feet apart. This grass can also handle acid soil, poor soil, sandy soil and clay soil! As for drainage, it can tolerate moist to dry areas and can even tolerate seasonal flooding. Just remember the flower heads are their prettiest when they are backlit by the sun.

*Spartina bakeri* (Sand cordgrass) is another native clump grass which can grow four to five feet and can be used in mass plantings or as a visual screen. Sand cordgrass does best in full sun and is tolerant of all soil types. This grass can grow four to six feet tall. For those of you living along the shore line it also has high salt tolerance. Therefore, it is wonderful for beach-front areas.

*Spartina patens* (Salt meadow cordgrass or Marsh hay) is a native mat forming grass which can be found near rivers or on the dunes. It grows to a height of one to two feet but often lays down along the ground when it becomes thick or if it is growing in a windy location.

*Pennisetum setaceum* (Fountain grass) is another very showy grass. This grass has gracefully arching leaves and erect or nodding rose-colored flower spikes that can be a foot long. The grass grows in dense clumps that can get three to four feet tall and two to three feet across. When in bloom, a fountain of feathery plumes are held above the foliage. Because this plant has escaped cultivation and become established in part of southern Florida it would be best to choose a cultivar such as 'Cupreum' which has reddish stems and leaves and the plumes are a copper color. 'Rubrum' and 'Purpureum' are larger and can grow to five feet tall with dark purple leaves and nodding plumes that are burgundy-red and 15 inches long. 'Eaton Canyon' is a miniature version

that only grows to about 30 inches tall and has burgundy-red foliage and plumes. These cultivars generally don't set seed and therefore are a better choice for Florida gardens.

These are just a few of the ornamental grasses that can add interesting textures and color to the landscape. Whether they are used as a backdrop, screen, groundcover, or accent, ornamental grasses could make an attractive addition to any yard.