Landscape Designers Share Their Favorite Selections for Pacific Northwest Gardens

By Janine Anderson

 Ornamental grasses are finely textured plants that lend a casual and relaxed feeling to your landscape. They move with breezes and glimmer in sunlight, changing appearance with the seasons and time of day. They also provide food, nesting material, and cover for birds.

Primary considerations when selecting ornamental grasses include site conditions, such as light exposure and soil type. Many ornamental grasses perform best in sunny conditions with moderately moist soils, however some will adapt well to a variety of light and moisture regimes, even dry shade. Although inherently informal, ornamental grasses can also be effective in more traditional landscapes—for example, when planted along a formal entryway.

There are many exquisitely beautiful grasses and grass-like plants, but which of these perform well in our region? I contacted some local landscape designers to get their thoughts and recommendations.

Maiden Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*)

Although the variety of maiden grass cultivars available at local garden centers can be
overwhelming, area landscape designers are almost unanimously enthusiastic about a mere handful of the selections. These deciduous grasses offer three-season interest, with arching foliage emerging in spring, summer-to-fall flower panicles that develop into attractive seed heads, and fall leaf colors that shimmer in the autumn light.

Maiden grass—native to forest and shrubland in eastern Asia—is not particularly drought resistant and will look its best with some summer irrigation, a bright location, and minimal or no fertilization. Cut it to the ground in winter before the new foliage emerges.

The white-variegated foliage of *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Morning Light’ looks silvery blue in a border and has a fine, airy texture. It lightens dark corners and is effective by itself or en masse. The fine-foliaged ‘Adagio’ forms a petite mound spiked with feathery seed head plumes in August. The pinkish flowers of ‘Yaku Jima’ emerge in September, turning beige later in the fall as the seeds mature, while the foliage takes on orange tones. ‘Gold Bar’ is a narrow, vertical selection with clean, bold, variegated foliage that maintains its upright form.

Fountain Grasses (*Pennisetum species*)
Fountain grasses are aptly named. From late June to October, a fountain of flowers rises and cascades above the basal clump of foliage.

Fountain grasses require full sun and can handle a hot spot. The soil should be well drained (avoid wet areas), and only occasional watering is needed during summer dry spells. As with maiden grass, fountain grass should be cut to the ground in fall or winter after the seed heads are no longer attractive.

Local designers are partial to varieties of the species *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, which is native to East Asia and western Australia. The straight species grows up to five feet high and wide and offers silvery to pinkish-white summer flowers and golden yellow fall leaves. Designer Laura Kleppe considers two diminutive selections, ‘Little Bunny’ and ‘Hameln’, her standbys. Also favored is ‘Burgundy Bunny’, which stays under two feet tall and has red-tinged foliage that emerges in spring.

‘Karley Rose’ is a popular selection of *Pennisetum orientale*—a species from Northwest Asia and North Africa. It grows up to three feet high and wide and offers smoky, rose-purple flower spikes in late summer and yellowish-tan fall color. Although ‘Karley Rose’ is a Great Plant Picks (greatplantpicks.org) selection for our region, some designers have found that it self-sows in abundance, necessitating hours of weeding to eradicate the seedlings that pop up everywhere.

**Japanese Forest Grass/Hakone Grass** (*Hakonechloa macra*)
Few grasses inspire more awe than *Hakonechloa macra*, native to the mountainous Hakone region of Japan. Designer Susan Picquelle considers Hakone grass the most glorious grass, especially when viewed from above. Although Hakone grass stays well under two feet tall, some varieties...
spread to five feet wide or more. It is dramatic when lining a walkway, but also eye-popping in combination with other plants.

Hakone grass does well in shade and can handle some sun, but hot afternoon sunlight should be avoided. Regular water during dry periods will keep it looking lush and full. As with other deciduous grasses, *Hakonechloa macra* can be cut to the ground in winter before the new foliage emerges.

Many designers favor the variety ‘Aureola’. With leaves striped green and gold, it appears as a true yellow in the landscape, and designer Susan Picquelle believes it coordinates well with other plants. The chartreuse variety ‘All Gold’ is also very popular—you’ll see it strongly featured in the Arboretum’s new Centennial Summer Garden—as is the more diminutive selection, ‘Beni Kaze’. At three feet wide, the green ‘Beni Kaze’ takes on tones of deep red, burnt orange, and gold as summer merges into fall.

**Sedges (Carex species)**

Sedges are lower-growing evergreen or deciduous grass-like plants that are attractive in drifts or edging a walkway. They tend to look best with occasional water. Sun and shade requirements vary by species.

Many of our local designers use the fine-textured evergreen New Zealand hair sedge (*Carex testacea*), which has dense, arching tufts of coppery-orange foliage and prefers full sun to light shade. Bowles’ golden sedge (*Carex elata* ‘Aurea’) is another favorite. Although this deciduous, clump-forming selection thrives in sun or light shade, its chartreuse foliage really brightens up areas with low light.

Several varieties of the Japanese sedge, *Carex oshimensis*, are popular with designers. Designer Lisa Bauer favors ‘Everillo’ because the winter burn that afflicts other sedges is absent. Its lime green leaves are stiff but flexible and look great in mass plantings. Other varieties of this species that are specified by designers include ‘Evergold’, with dark-green and butter-yellow variegated foliage, and ‘Everest’, whose deep-green blades have snowy-white margins. Japanese sedge does best in partial shade and moist soils.

Small Wonders

Edging a garden bed with small grasses gives a finishing touch to your composition. Alternatively, massing smaller selections beneath a specimen tree showcases the tree without detracting from it.

The “truly black” black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* ‘Nigrescens’, sometimes sold as ‘Ebony Knight’) is eye-catching in any landscape. Another—and quite different—mondo grass, *Ophiopogon* ‘Pam Harper’, is favored by Vancouver, Washington designer Vanessa Nagel, who likes to mingle this green-and-white variegated selection with groundcovers and short perennials to create a ground-covering matrix beneath shrubs.

Several fine-foliaged fescues are good candidates for drier areas. Among these are *Festuca roemeri*, an evergreen Oregon native with gray-green leaves, and West Coast cool-season native *Festuca rubra* ‘Patrick’s Point’, an exceptionally blue variety that tops out at nine inches tall.

For dry shade and low water, try the chartreuse woodrush *Luzula sylvatica* ‘Aurea’. Its green cousin, *Luzula pilosa* ‘Igel’, which reaches six inches tall, is happier in a woodland setting with rich, moist, well-drained soil.

The Best of the Rest

At the top of the list in this category has to be variegated purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea* ssp. caerulea ‘Variegata’). This tidy, variegated clumper reaches three feet high by three feet.
wide, once the flowers and seed heads emerge in late summer. It is effective rimming a border or in a drift. The plant is native to moist areas in Europe and Asia, so provide water during dry summer spells. Cut to the ground in the fall after it turns yellow.

Karl Foerster feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis × acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’) adds a strong vertical element to your landscape. Although the foliage reaches only two feet, its feathery flower stalks, which emerge in June, grow to six feet tall. It enjoys a sunny location and needs summer water only until established. As with other deciduous grasses, ‘Karl Foerster’ should be cut to the ground in late winter.

Two worthy evergreen selections of a more diminutive nature include autumn moor grass (*Sesleria autumnalis*) and New Zealand red hook sedge (*Uncinia rubra* ‘Belinda’s Find’). Maxing out at under two feet tall and wide, autumn moor grass has bright–green narrow leaves and silvery–white flower stalks through fall and winter. Native to southeastern Europe, it needs little water once established and just a bit of fussing in the spring to rake out the old foliage. ‘Belinda’s Find’, which reaches 12 inches tall, has arching, bronze–red leaves and prefers cool, moist conditions.

One of the many non–grass “grasses,” *Astelia nivicola* ‘Red Gem’ is a well–behaved stunner in the landscape. This evergreen lily relative has arching, red–tinged and silver sword–shaped foliage that reaches about two feet high and wide.

Avoid hot spots and full sun and provide rich, well–drained soil. It’s planted in lovely drifts along the upper trail in the New Zealand Forest at the Arboretum.

**Caveats and Conclusions**

Gardening is a process of trial and error. Most landscape designers love plants and like to experiment with unfamiliar varieties and try out new compositions. They develop a mental database of which plants work, as well as those they want to avoid.

Designers avoid grasses they have found to self–sow. Few things are more frustrating than a glorious garden being invaded by scores of unwanted seedlings. Grasses you might see in your local garden center that have a reputation for self–sowing include *Carex comans* ‘Frosted Curls’ and Mexican feather reed grass (*Nassella tenuissima*).

Feelings about some grasses can be mixed. One designer I contacted raved about pheasant’s tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*), while another has found it seeds everywhere and will not use it. For the same reason, the jury is conflicted about grasses such as *Carex flacca* ‘Blue Zinger’, *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, *Luzula sylvatica* ‘Marginata’, *Molinia caerulea* ssp. *arundinacea* ‘Skyracer’, and *Stipa gigantea*. Although it doesn’t self–sow, *Carex morrowii* ‘Ice Dance’ has rhizomes that enable it to expand beyond its intended territory; at the same time, it might be perfect in a woodland garden that stays a little on the dry side, restricting the spread.

When in doubt, consult a landscape designer about the best grasses for your garden, or better yet, enlist a landscape designer to help you create compositions that you will enjoy now, and for years to come.

Adapted with permission from the website of the Washington Chapter of the Association of Professional Landscape Designers. Visit [www.apldwa.org](http://www.apldwa.org) for more great articles and garden resources, or to contact a designer.