

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES: A Strong Plant in 2011

Ornamental grasses, like most plants, had a difficult year in 2011. In fact you may have noticed that some ornamental grasses didn't bloom or set seed heads this year due to the stress imposed by the hot and dry summer.

But regardless of whether the ornamental grasses bloomed or not, they were still one of 2011's strong plants that for the most part were able to cope with the stressful conditions. These sturdy plants should always be considered as a good option for those looking to garden with plants that require very little water and maintenance. Yes, they do need to be cut down each spring, but that is a small price to pay for a plant that requires very little attention during the rest of the year.

At the end of the year, many people want to know whether grasses should be cut down now or in the spring. In my opinion spring is preferred. This is simply because I enjoy the winter interest that grasses provide and see no need to remove all the foliage that insulates the plant's crown and will help protect it during winter conditions. Though in cases where a clean looking landscape is desired or in a public setting where grass debris can be a problem, cutting grasses back early is still an option.

2011's Best Performers

K-State's Horticulture Research & Extension Center took note this year of which ornamental grasses seemed to be least affected by the heat and drought. Here are some of the ornamental grasses that performed very well in 2011.

Miscanthus is a very popular ornamental grass, and one cultivar performed exceptionally well this year. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio' grows 3-4' tall and features extremely narrow, silver-gray blades which turn yellow in fall. Tiny pink-tinged tassel-like flowers appear above the foliage in late summer, gradually turning into creamy white plumes by fall as the seeds mature.

Another *Miscanthus* cultivar called 'Yaku Jima' also did very well. This cultivar typically grows to 3-4' tall and has 3/8" green leaf blades that arch gracefully downward. Tiny flowers with red tinges emerge in fluffy panicles above the foliage on this plant in August-September.

There were also several Switchgrass cultivars that thrived this year. They were strong growers that flowered on time and even provided some good fall interest. Two big cultivars that did well were 'Cloud Nine' and 'Dallas Blues.'

'Cloud Nine' forms a narrow, erect clump of light metallic blue foliage (to 6'). The foliage is topped in summer by finely-textured, golden flower panicles which hover over the foliage like an airy cloud.

'Dallas Blues' grows in a dense upright habit up to 5' tall and has grayed blue-green foliage. It has large purple-tinged flower panicles that hover over the foliage, is late flowering, and had excellent rust brown to tan winter foliage color.

Three other Switchgrass cultivars that did very well were: *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind', *Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal', and *Panicum virgatum* 'Thundercloud'.

Right Plant Right Place

As gardeners it is always important to carefully select plants that will meet our needs. If this year was any indication of what we can continue to expect, then ornamental grasses are one of those plants that should be on every gardener's list. There are many great ornamental grasses available for every taste and style. Who wouldn't want a plant that requires little to no watering, has almost no pests, and is tolerant of harsh sites and conditions.

For a more complete list of ornamental grass choices for our area visit www.prairiestarflowers.com