



g a r d e n i n g

glorious grasses

PHOTOS AND STORY BY MELANIE REKOLA

As autumn comes to be, ornamental grasses take centre stage of many beautiful landscapes. I adore watching the fall breeze rustle through their mature foliage; often with silver, pink or bronze seed heads nodding high above. Certain grasses even turn colour in fall, adding a whole different dimension to their aesthetic worth. I find many people tend to forget about the autumn garden when designing their landscapes. Take a critical eye to your garden; with fall in mind. Sometimes a landscape just looks past-its-prime at this time of year, with no gorgeous flowers at the forefront. Or maybe you need a focal point with a textural change of pace. Trendy ornamental grasses may be the piece you need to update and add movement to an otherwise static garden.



MELANIE'S PLANT PICKS:

Zebra Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis Zebrinus*): I love Zebra grass for its wonderful horizontal yellow striping, and its elegant arching habit. It is often confused with "Porcupine" grass for its similar markings, but Porcupine has a much stiffer and rougher appearance than Zebra. Zebra grows five feet plus and its thick leaves and unusual markings make it a wonderful statement plant or perfect for planting en masse.

Giant Miscanthus (*Miscanthus x Giganteus*): This grass is truly a giant, growing eight feet plus. Great for a space where height is needed, but there's not much room available for planting. It has a thick, mid-green leaf with an arching habit and is great as a privacy screen or to add a somewhat "tropical" effect to any yard. I especially like it around pools for exactly this reason. Though it rarely blooms within most parts of Canada, it's still worth planting solely for its foliage size and texture.

Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardi*): An eye-catching grass that also grows about five feet in height. The lush green leaves of mid-summer give way to distinctive three-part seedheads with a purplish colour. The grand finale of the growing season occurs when the leaves turn a reddish-copper colour.

Karl Foerster Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* Karl Foerster): Though this grass is commonly used, I still find it irresistible. Its seed heads are very unique and look somewhat like wheat. It is extremely hardy and drought/salt tolerant. Mass planting is best and it has an early spring show of growth that not many other grasses possess. Look for new varieties of this grass with white or green margins.

MaidenHair (*Miscanthus sinensis*): I use five-foot maidenhair grass for its beautiful ultra fine texture and its great contrast with larger leafed plants and large stone pieces. It has gorgeous seed plums as well! Look for varieties such as "MorningLight," "Huron Sunrise" or "Graziella" for a variety of foliage and seed head colours.



Sometimes space just doesn't allow for such large and bold plantings as mentioned above. Dwarf grasses are the answer to a much daintier statement.

Blue Fescue and other dwarf grasses: Adding blue foliage such as "Elijah Blue Fescue" can really brighten up the autumn landscape. The colour is very complementary to much of the oranges and golds that naturally occur in fall. Though these grasses are small, a mass planting of five or more makes a beautiful statement to any garden. Other dwarf grasses to look for are dwarf maidenhair, little Blue stem (for fall colour) and dwarf fountain grass; all great for rock gardens as well.

Ornamental grasses offer a unique opportunity for a vertical element, much different than what small trees and shrubs offer. Their herbaceous nature makes them ideal for difficult areas prone to snow piling where an upright plant component is needed. Bear in mind, fall is not the best time to plant grasses. Spring is the ideal planting time and will give you a great rate of survival.

I have seen whole gardens planted with only grasses that look so distinct in their uniformity, so don't be afraid of adding different varieties to one area. Try planting a grass (or three) in an area toward the middle to front of a garden bed. This can add an unexpected surprise and really give a fresh sense of randomness that is often lost in gardens that are seemingly "too planned." Best of luck! **OH**

