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Covering Ground with Native Ornamental Grass and Sedge

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Turfgrass and ornamental grass share a last name, but they are very different plants. For starters, ornamental grasses and their cousins, the sedges, often fill niches where turfgrass is faint of heart.

Let's consider the differences: Turfgrass varieties become a lawn by spreading shallow roots. Ornamental grasses, by contrast, almost universally stay in place as they grow into a "bunching" form.

Where turfgrass varieties can handle mowing and foot traffic, ornamental grasses are selected for their height and color. Turfgrass species in our area are cool season varieties, a distinct genetic type. They look best during spring and fall. Many ornamental grasses, in contrast, are warm-season genetic types that look best when the weather is hot and dry.

Even cool season ornamental grasses withstand hot, dry weather better than most turfgrass, possibly because ornamental grass roots range from one- to 12 feet deep, sometimes more. These roots can find deep groundwater sources once they are mature.

Deep roots also help them survive the rigors of sloping landscapes, where turfgrass often struggles. After all, turfgrass roots are usually about six inches deep.

As for their ecological impact, native ornamental grass provides both food and cover to birds, insects, and wildlife. Turfgrass offers little value to wildlife, partly because of mowing.

Ready to cover ground with ornamental grasses?

Let's go.

If you have a sunny, dry space, consider drought-tolerant prairie dropseed, side oats grama, or switchgrass. (See the sidebar for botanical names.)

If you've got a moist, partly shaded area where grass won't grow, consider tufted hairgrass.

For woodland edges and lightly shaded spaces, use autumn bentgrass, wavy hairgrass, purple lovegrass, or northern sea oats.

Got dry shade? The most vigorous variety I've found is bright green seersucker sedge.

For shades of blue, both blue bunny or blue ribbon sedge are possibilities. For a fine-leaved, grassy appearance, Pennsylvania or Appalachian sedge may be the answers.

As for planting, you'll probably get fastest results with nursery plants. Though it may be less expensive to start from seed, many ornamental grass and sedge species require some seeding skill.

As for spacing, don't be afraid to plant these grasses close together for weed-fighting density. Use 6- to 18-inch spacing, depending on the species.

Like all plants, ornamental grasses require regular moisture during the establishment period. After that, some are extremely drought tolerant while others need more moisture.

As long as you meet their light, soil, and moisture requirements, most ornamental grasses need very little care. Give them a haircut in late November or early spring.

Ready to shop?

For nursery plants, try some locals that specialize in natives. Little River Natives, a nursery in Tolland, grows hard-to-find native grasses. Other native plant specialists in the area include Earthtones in Woodbury, Woodland Trails in Eastford, and Nasami Farm in Whately, Massachusetts. Many independent garden centers carry ornamental grasses.

Want to learn more? Visit the library for *Grasses: Versatile Partners for Uncommon Garden Design*, by Nancy Ondra (Storey Publishing, 2002), or *The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Living Landscapes* by Rick Darke (Timber Press, 2007).

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