



Halton Region Master Gardeners

Serving the communities of Burlington, Hamilton, Milton & Oakville

My Ornamental Grasses Project – What to Select?

Most experts agree that the maintenance of ornamental grasses is straightforward if proper attention is paid to the selection, planting, and post-planting care until the grasses become established. This may include tasks such as mulching, staking, dividing, watering, shearing, winter protection, etc. Since most of these are routine in nature, this article will focus on the selection of perennial grasses for a simple project I have in mind for my property in the Eastern Townships.

One advantage of ornamental grasses is they are attractive year round. Individual species may be tolerant of drought or moisture, sun or shade, may flower in Spring, Summer or Fall, are colourful, evergreen, and deer resistant for those who live in the country. The most common uses are for borders, focal points, ground covers, and graveled areas, and they can also be used for screening, and for inside and outside decoration around the house. So in selecting ornamental grasses for your property, it is important to know what you want to use them for.

My zone 4 one acre lot is on a cul-de-sac about 3 km from the town centre, with a golf course to the south and a municipal run-off ditch in the north, lined by willow bushes and stands of *Typha latifolia*. These serve as an attractive screen for my property, which attracts birds and other small creatures during the warmer seasons.

I plan to develop a 30' by 8' raised bed with ornamental grasses to screen the semi-private SE quarter behind the house from the rest of the garden. It will include the trees and line of bushes I have along its western edge. I want colour during the fall and winter, and will also use it for experimenting with various annuals. The area is dry and sunny, but we get a fair amount of rain, so I will want grasses that will be moisture and sun tolerant. I still have to decide on the layout, but I know I want to include taller grasses for screening, and lower lying grasses for colour.



Schizachyrium - Scoparium - Little Bluestem

Below, are some of the favourites, I've found:

Shade

- *Carex elata* 'Aurea'
- *Carex pensylvannica* – *Pennsylvania Sedge* – N.A. native, best planted in masses, fine green foliage, nice in a woodland garden
- *Hakonechloa macra* 'All Gold'
- *Panicum clandestinum* - Deer's Tongue Grass - native, 2' tall, like bamboo

Sun

- *Briza media* 'Trembling Hearts' - small clumps, tall stems with inflated oat-like spikelets.
- *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Avalanche' – variegated form of 'Karl Foerster' – upright clumping habit
- *Molinia caerulea* , *Purple Moor Grass* – slow growing mop of cream & green foliage – easy care

Fall colours and cut flowers

- *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' – upright clumping grass in narrow vase shape, great for containers too!
- *Panicum virgatum* 'Prairie Sky' - tight clumps with upright metallic blue blades turning amber/yellow in Fall.
- *Panicum virgatum* 'Rotstrahlbusch' - with grey-green blades turning red in Fall.

Specimen

- *Andropogon gerardii* (Big Bluestem) - native, drought tolerant, fall colours, 3-10' high

Small Grasses (less than 2')

- Blue Fescue - as accent and edging;
- Blue Oat (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) - an evergreen and lovely feature plant



Carex pensylvannica - Pennsylvania Sedge