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Xeriscaping: turf and ornamental grasses for low-water landscapes

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Quick Facts

Proper soil preparation and deep but infrequent watering are most important in establishing grasses in a xeriscape. Select grasses according to the nature of the area to be covered, water availability and effect desired.

Use sod-forming grasses near houses and areas of high foot traffic.

Buffalograss and drought-enduring varieties of bluegrass are suitable in a xeriscape.

Use coarse grasses such as tall fescue, smooth brome and wheatgrass in outlying areas where appearance and traffic are not as important as near the house.

Warm-season grasses, such as blue grama and buffalograss, go dormant and turn tan in fall and green up in late spring.

Ornamental grasses can be used to complement a xeriscape; some are low ground covers, others make a tall background or screen or accent plant.

Grasses are useful in landscapes for covering the soil to prevent erosion, to cool the area, for recreation and to provide a transition between shrub borders, tree groupings and non-grass ground covers. In a xeriscape, there are alternatives to bluegrass that can provide an attractive lawn while reducing the need for frequent irrigation.

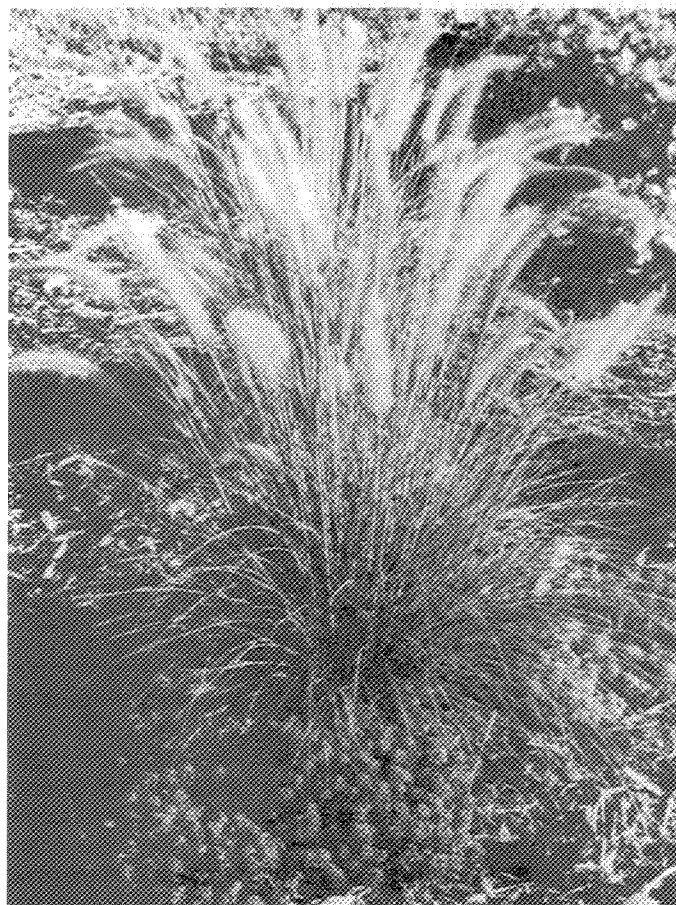


Figure 1: Fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) growing in a bed mulched with wood chips. This drought-enduring ornamental grass is a tender perennial often grown as a tall annual in Colorado.

Ornamental grasses also can be used in separate beds or borders along with shrubs to complement a xeriscape planting. Another useful

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purpose of many ornamental grasses are the seed heads, which can be harvested in late fall, dried and used for indoor enjoyment or left on to enjoy outdoors all winter.

Improve Soil Before Planting

Regardless of the grass type or types you select, soil improvement is a must. Even buffalograss, tall fescue, blue grama and similar xeric types will thrive better when soil conditions are improved. Where soils are heavy clay and compact easily or, the other extreme, are loose and sandy, incorporate organic matter. Use two to three cubic yards of aged barnyard manure or compost for every 1,000 square feet. Rototill into the top six inches, thoroughly mixing with the soil. Refer to Service in Action sheet 7.203 for more information on preparing a soil for lawns.

Selecting Turfgrasses

The type of turfgrass selected should be based upon the nature of the area to be covered, water availability and the overall effect and use desired. Areas close to the house or where uniform turf is desired are probably best planted with fine-bladed, sod-forming varieties such as buffalograss or bluegrass. For more information on buffalograss, see Service in Action sheet 7.224. Outlying areas, where soil cover is needed, but appearance and foot traffic are not as important can be planted to various coarse grasses. Some of these may be bunch types. Examples include tall fescue, smooth brome and wheatgrasses.

Even drought-enduring grasses need water to get started. They also need occasional irrigations during prolonged dry spells. Provisions should be made to apply supplemental water when needed. Without supplemental irrigation during droughty times, grasses will thin out. Thin turf is no contest for aggressive weeds that will dominate following a drought period.

Several drought-enduring grasses are warm-season types. Because of this, they go dormant and turn tan at frost and stay tan until late spring. Blue grama and buffalograss are this type.

These two natives will perform well with deep irrigation about once a month. They are both fairly short and thus need infrequent or no mowing depending upon appearance desired. They are attractive when left unmowed because of the flower and seed heads.

If you are looking for a grass that stays green longer, choose a cool-season variety. For fine turf, bluegrass is still the best. Some varieties that are relatively drought-tolerant include: Majestic, America and Merion. Improved varieties of tall fescue come closest to resembling bluegrass. Tall fescue can be maintained as a dense nice-appearing turf with 50 percent less water than bluegrass.

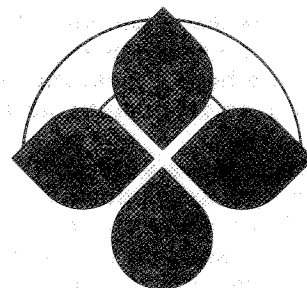
The key to drought-tolerance, regardless of variety chosen is deep root development. This is brought about by deep and thorough soil preparation and deep, infrequent watering.

Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses are frequently used in xeriscape plantings as individual clumps, ground covers or as a tall background. The foliage provides a change of color and texture and the graceful form of some varieties creates accent to the landscape.

For color variation, use blue fescue (*Festuca ovina glauca*) and variegated moor grass (*Molinia coerulea*). Blue fescue often is planted in mass as a low ground cover. Variegated moor grass, up to a foot in height, is a creeping ground cover for intermediate-height plantings.

For taller, background plantings use miscanthus grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*) or hardy pampas grass (*Erianthus ravannae*). Miscanthus attains a height of about four feet, pampas grass up to ten feet. The feathery seed heads of both species are attractive and can be cut in late fall for dried arrangements or left for winter appeal.



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