

Ornamental grasses can play a part in most gardens, from providing calming accompaniments to more colourful flowering plants to being the sole focus of the design. There are grasses for damp or dry soil, shady as well as sunny situations the soil wants to be moist but well-drained, moderately fertile soil. Many are great to add to the cutting garden; others perform well in containers.

Planting ? *It is important to plant grasses at the correct time.*

Grasses from cool climates such as Deschampsia, Festuca, Helictotrichon and Stipa come into growth in late winter and flower before mid-summer and so should be planted in autumn for the best establishment

Grasses from warm climates such as Miscanthus, Panicum, Pennisetum and Spartina come into growth in late spring, flower after mid-summer and are usually cut back in late winter. They are best planted in late spring.

Container cultivation ? *Grasses are good plants for containers.*

Use loam-based compost such as John Innes No 2 with 20 percent loam-free compost to lighten the mix. Evergreen grasses such as Carex combine well with winter bedding to give height and a contrast in texture.

Feeding? *One application of a balanced fertiliser in spring is adequate.*

Pruning and training ? *The foliage on deciduous grasses can be left until February for its structure and movement in the depths of winter when any contribution to interest in the garden is welcome.*

When to cut back? *Early spring to mid-spring depending on the species.*

How to cut back? *Deciduous grasses, which turn a golden, straw brown rather than necessarily loose their leaves, need different treatment from those with are evergreen.*

Deciduous grasses

Some deciduous species, for example Stipa tenuissima, Calamagrostis xacutiflora 'Karl Foerster' and Deschampsia cespitosa 'Goldtau' should be trimmed to ground level before growth starts in early spring. Other deciduous grasses, such as Pennisetum orientale, do not produce new growth until later in the season. The culms (old stems) will protect the crown, so delay clipping these types until late April.

Pruning late (mid-March to April) is also appropriate for Miscanthus, which has structural stems that persist over the winter. These should be pruned away individually with secateurs to ensure the new, green shoots are not cut off in the process.

Evergreen grasses

Small evergreen grasses, such as Festuca glauca, can be trimmed in spring. Remove any brown tips and cut back the dead leaves that usually collect around the base. Evergreen grasses such as sedges (Carex and Luzula) are not cut back completely like deciduous grasses. Spent flowering stalks can be cut off, and any unsightly scorched or diseased leaves can be removed individually. Once the clump outgrows its space, you can divide it as you would any other perennial. Debris can be removed, the area tidied, and mulch and fertiliser spread as for deciduous grasses.

Step-by-step pruning of deciduous grasses

There are three plants in this clump. The dead leaves and flowering stalks have been left uncut over the winter. It is now ready for cutting back, before the new growth comes up in spring. Cut back the spent stems with secateurs. Take care not to damage any new growth that may already be coming up through the crown of the plant. Stems and debris can be pulled out by hand from the centre of the clump. The grass is now half-way cut back; it is easier to see what you are doing, and to avoid damaging any young green shoots coming up through the lower part of the clump. You can now cut the clump back to a few centimetres from ground level, leaving a hairy tuft through which the new growth can come up easily without getting tangled with the old stems. Pick out any dead leaves or debris from the crown of the plant, and remove any weeds. Tidy the surrounding area. You may wish to mulch and top-dress around the crown with 50g per sq m of a general fertiliser. This will feed the plant as it comes back into growth, and freshen up its appearance before the spring.

Propagation

[Division](#) is one of the main ways to increase your stock of grasses. Carrying this out at the right time of year is important. Some grasses such as [Carex pendula](#) or Stipa arundinacea seed themselves prolifically to the point of being invasive. For less easy to germinate grasses, collect well-developed flower heads just before the seeds are fully ripe, and ripen them in brown paper bags indoors. [Sow the seeds](#) fresh at a temperature of 10°C (50°F), or store them and sow them in spring.

Here are a few top performers.

[Cortaderia selloana](#) 'Pumila' – pampas grasses have been much maligned, but this smaller cultivar is elegant and mixes well with other perennials and shrubs. Height: 1.5m (5ft)

Festuca glauca 'Elijah Blue' – one of the bluest of fescues, 'Elijah Blue' forms a spiky dome. Trim back every few years in March to get rid of dead leaves. Height: 40cm (16in)

[Miscanthus sinensis](#) 'Morning Light' – a compact cultivar with slim cream margins to its leaves, this miscanthus is ideal for small gardens and even containers. Height: 1.5m (5ft)

[Pennisetum villosum](#) – the fluffy rabbits-tail-like seedheads of this grass are an instant attraction. Not the hardiest: needs sun and free drainage for the best results. Height: 60cm (2ft)

[Stipa tenuissima](#) – the fine blades of this grass dance even in light winds. Cut back in spring for fresh green growth, which ages to soft gold by late summer. Height: 60cm (2ft)

Deschampsia cespitosa 'Goldtau' (syn. 'Golden Dew') – compact and graceful, this grass has spikes of airy, reddish-brown flowers. Tolerant of shade and damp conditions, it is can be grown in gardens unsuited to many other ornamental grasses. Height: 75cm (30in)