

## ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

A common misperception of a xeriscape (low-water landscape) is that it is drab and boring. True, some of the attempts at 'xeriscape' one sees are, indeed, grey and unimaginative. (In the industry, we refer to these gardens as 'zero-scapes'.) These yards are typically flat, covered with rocks or gravel, and limited in vegetation to yucca or low-growing evergreens. They lack bloom colour, contouring, plant height variation, flow, proportion and year-round interest. To be fair, this landscape is ideal for folks who work out-of-town for longish periods or have no desire to perform much maintenance on their yard.

Fortunately, though, these uninspired landscapes are becoming the exception, rather than the norm for low-maintenance xeriscapes. While there is no such thing as a 'no maintenance' yard, a properly designed and installed xeriscape does not create an unmanageable amount of maintenance.

The key is to incorporate mixed plantings (varying plant types) and practice 'zonal planting', that is group plants that have the same water and light requirements. Because plant types vary from ground-huggers to majestic shade trees and coniferous evergreens – and everything in between – today we will look at a plant type that is increasing gaining favour in landscapes: ornamental grasses.

Much like flowering shrubs or herbaceous perennials, two other plant types, there is plenty of variation in colour, growing habit, mature height and spread, and bloom colour and time in ornamental grasses. This group can be classified into cool season or warm season. Once the air temperature rises above freezing in late winter or early spring, cool season grasses begin to grow. You'll notice bright foliage begin to appear amongst last year's spent leaves and flowering stalks. In comparison, warm season ornamental grasses begin to grow much later in the spring – so much later you may think they have succumbed over the winter. Warm season grasses require warm **soil** temperatures achieved after two or three consecutive weeks of warm days and frost-free nights.

When you are selecting ornamental grasses for your xeriscape keep a few things in mind:

- ornamental grasses provide year-round interest; choose a mix of cool season and warm season species
- select grasses with a variation in foliage colour, bloom colour and mature height; some ornamental grasses produce vibrant fall colour
- avoid runners – grasses that will rapidly move out of bounds and encroach on other plantings
- most xeriscape grasses require full sun; those that can tolerate *some* shade include 'Karl Foerester', 'Overdam' and 'Avalanche' feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora*), blue oat grass, (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*), northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) and fescues (*Festuca*).

As for care, practice 'tough love' -- rich, fertile soil or overwatering produces floppy grasses and center dieback. Cut back ornamental grasses in the spring once you see new growth. Letting them stand over the winter provides shelter and food for birds and they look especially attractive with a light dusting of snow. Grasses can be divided, but it is a tough job!