



Ornamental Grasses Suitable for Michigan Gardens

Dr. Art Cameron
Horticulture Department
Michigan State University
cameron@msu.edu

Short Sweeties ... Containers and ground covers (less than 3 feet)

<i>Carex</i> 'The Beatles'	Mop head carex
<i>Carex comans</i> 'Toffee Twist'	New Zealand sedge
<i>Carex morrowi</i> 'Evergold'	Sedge
<i>Festuca</i> 'Elijah Blue'	Blue fescue
<i>Eragrostis</i> 'Wind Dancer'	Chinese love grass
<i>Hakonechloa macra</i> 'Aureola', 'All Gold'	Variegated Japanese grass
<i>Imperata</i> 'Red Baron'	Blood grass
<i>Molinia</i> 'Variegata'	Variegated moor grass
<i>Pennisetum</i> 'Little Bunny'	Dwarf fountain grass
<i>Pennisetum</i> 'Hameln'	Fountain grass

Medium Beauties ... Great for perennial beds (3-5 feet)

<i>Calamagrostis xacutifolia</i> 'Karl Foerster' 'Avalanche' 'El Dorado'	Feather reed grass
<i>Calamagrostis brachytricha</i>	Fall-blooming reed grass
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	Northern sea oats
<i>Deschampsia cespitosa</i>	Tufted hair grass
<i>Helictotrichon sempervirens</i>	Blue oats grass
<i>Miscanthus purpurascens</i>	Flame grass
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Graziella' 'Gold Bar' 'Morning Light' 'Rigoletto'	Japanese silver grass
<i>Panicum virgatum</i> 'Hanse Herms' 'Heavy Metal' 'Rotstrahlbusch' 'Shenandoah'	Switch grass
<i>Pennisetum orientale</i> 'Karley Rose'	
<i>Schizochyrium scoparium</i>	Little bluestem
<i>Spodiopogon sibiricus</i>	Frost grass
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Prairie dropseed

Large Grasses ... For masses, screens and specimens (5-10 feet)

<i>Arundo donax variegatus</i>	Variegated giant reed grass
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Cabaret' 'Gracillimus' 'Malapartus' 'Sarabande' 'Silberfeder' 'Strictus' 'Variegatus'	Japanese silver grass
<i>Molinia litoralis</i> 'Skyracer' 'Windspiel'	Tall purple moor grass
<i>Panicum virgatum</i> 'Cloud Nine' 'Dallas Blues' 'Northwind'	Switch grass

HUMONGOUS Grasses... To impress your friends

(>10 feet)	
<i>Arundo donax</i>	Giant reed grass
<i>Miscanthus giganteus</i> aka <i>Miscanthus floridulus</i>	Giant silver grass
<i>Saccharum ravennae</i>	Ravenna grass

Tender perennials ...

Plant again each year – but many are worth it!!	
<i>Carex buchananii</i>	Leather leaf sedge
<i>Nasella tenuisima</i>	Mexican feather grass
<i>Pennisetum xadvena</i>	Fountain grass
<i>Pennisetum xadvena</i> 'Rubrum'	Purple fountain grass
<i>Pennisetum sp.</i>	Purple millet
<i>Rhynchelytrum nerviglume</i> a.k.a. <i>Melinis nerviglumis</i>	Ruby grass
<i>Saccharum officinalis</i>	Sugar cane

Best native grasses ... for the wild spot

<i>Andropogon gerardii</i>	Big bluestem
<i>Bouteloua sp.</i>	Side oats gramma
<i>Carex muskingumensis</i>	
esp Little Midge	Palm sedge
<i>Eragrostis spectabilis</i>	Purple love grass
<i>Koeleria macrantha</i>	June grass
<i>Luzula multiflora</i>	Woodrush
<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	Switch grass
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	Little bluestem
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	Indian grass
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Prairie Drop Seed

Tough as Nails ... for cold and dry – Zone 4 hardy

<i>Calamagrostis</i> 'Karl Foerster'
<i>Miscanthus giganteus</i>
<i>Miscanthus</i> 'Morning Light'
<i>Miscanthus</i> 'Silberfeder'
<i>Miscanthus</i> 'Strictus'
<i>Molinia</i> 'Skyracer'
<i>Panicum</i> 'Heavy Metal', 'Cloud Nine'
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i> – Indian grass

Shade tolerant ...

<i>Carex</i> (Sedges) – many American species
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>
<i>Hakonochloa macra</i> 'All Gold' is a great cultivar
<i>Luzula sylvestris</i>

Sources of Ornamental Grasses

Sometimes finding specific new (and old) cultivars may be a challenge:

Several Michigan Nurseries produce ornamental grasses including Walter's Gardens, HorTech, and Amber Waves.

Tip: Mail-order using the web is an option for unique plants. Using a search engine, enter the species and cultivar name.

Herbaceous Perennial Picks

These work great with grasses in mid-Michigan.
Most require minimum care and are drought tolerant.

<i>Achillea</i> 'Fireland', 'Anthea', 'Moonshine' – Yarrow
<i>Amsonia hubrichtii</i> – Threadleaf Blue Star
<i>Amsonia tabernaemontana</i> – Blue Star
<i>Artemisia ludoviciana</i> 'Valerie Finnis'
<i>Buddleia globosa</i> 'Nanho Blue' – Butterfly Bush
<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i> 'Flying Saucers'
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i> – numerous cultivars – Purple Cone Flower
<i>Eupatorium</i> 'Gateway' and 'Little Joe' – Joe-Pye Weed
<i>Gaura lindheimeri</i> 'Whirling Butterfly' and others
<i>Geranium</i> 'Rozanne'
<i>Helianthus salicifolius</i> – Willow-Leaved Sunflower
<i>Nepeta faassenii</i> 'Six Hills Giant', 'Walker's Low' – Catmint
<i>Oenothera fruticosa</i> – Sundrop/Evening Primrose
<i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i> – Russian Sage
<i>Ratibida pinnata</i> – Yellow conflower
<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> 'Goldsturm' – Black Eyed Susan
<i>Sedum</i> 'Autumn Joy', 'Brilliant', 'Matrona', 'Rosy Glow'
<i>Silphium perfoliatum</i> Cup plant
<i>Vernonia missourica</i> Ironweed

Some Suggested Reading

Rick Darke. 2007. The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes. Timber Press.

Very well done – a standby in my book collection for design ideas.

Piet Oudolf. 1999. Designing with Plants. Timber Press. Outstanding photos and descriptions. Great for browsing when you are daydreaming about combinations.

Michael King and Piet Oudolf. Gardening with Grasses. 1998. Timber Press.

Excellent reading with more than enough information and design ideas to keep you busy for years.

Taylor's Guide to Ornamental Grasses. 1997. Roger Holmes, editor. Houghton Mifflin Company.