



# The Greatest Scapes: Ornamental Grasses as Cut Flowers

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Growers of specialty cut flowers have long used grasses for bouquet fillers or accents, and yet there is surprisingly little published information about the proper culture, care and especially post-harvest handling of these plants.

Grass flowers come in numerous forms, from tiny tufts to towering plumes, and in colors from subtle to bold. Moreover, the flowers aren't the only part of the plant that's useful. Grasses boast ornamental foliage that can greatly enhance arrangements. The long blades of the genus *Miscanthus*, for instance, may be solid green, tinted red, striped longitudinally or banded horizontally. They are sold in bunches of ten or more leaves.

Just as with the more familiar herbaceous plants grown for cutting, grasses used can be perennial or annual species. The fine bristly flowers of numerous *Pennisetum* varieties are highly decorative. *P. 'Moudry'* has lovely, near-black flowers but also has a tendency to self-sow and take over the garden. *Pennisetum 'National Arboretum'* has identical black flowers, but holds them out from the foliage better for a more impressive look and easier cutting.

*P. xadvena 'Rubrum'* boasts rich maroon foliage and flowers; its recent variegated offspring 'Fireworks' has identical flowers over leaves that are an absolute riot of red, green, pink and white stripes. Both are annuals in most parts of America, but they make large, impressive, dual-purpose clumps in a single season.

Some grasses aren't really grasses. "Bear grass," *Xerophyllum tenax*, for example, is a member of the lily family. But its long, strong grasslike foliage can be employed in numerous ways, green and dried. It makes a fine decorative wrap around other flowers' stems. Florists use it to bind large blossoms into balls or bride's bouquets. Indigenous tribes have relied on this North American native for centuries to weave tight, sturdy baskets.

In arrangements, as in the garden, grasses can be most effective when properly lit. If you look at the ornamental grass pictures in a plant catalog, you'll notice that many appear to have been photographed late in the day or early in the morning, backlit, with sunlight streaming through the flowers. This is not a coincidence.

Most grass flowers have finely-divided, hairlike structures that catch and scatter light rays so that the plumes themselves appear luminous. That garden asset translates beautifully to the vase when a light (or lights, for large arrangements) can be brought to bear at just the right angle.

One could also argue for the inclusion of bamboo in this category; after all, bamboo is also a grass with many ornamental applications. But those applications are quite different, as are that group's cultural needs, so we'll set bamboo aside as a digression to explore another time.

Perhaps someone will soon be inspired to write the book on what to do with them beyond the landscape. Meanwhile, here is a partial list of grasses that have significant commercial utility, and a few sources of good information.

## FLOWERS

- Arundo* (giant reed)
- Calamagrostis* (feather reed grass)
- Cortaderia* (pampas grass)
- Eragrostis* (love grass)
- Luzula* (wood rush)
- Melica* (pearl grass)
- Melinis* (ruby grass)
- Miscanthus sinensis* (maiden grass)
- Miscanthus xgiganteus* (giant miscanthus)
- Muhlenbergia* (purple muhly)
- Panicum* (switchgrass)
- Pennisetum setaceum* (fountain grass)
- Pennisetum xadvena* (purple fountain grass)

## SEEDHEADS

- Bouteloua* (sideoats gama)
- Briza* (quaking grass)
- Chasmanthium* (sea oats)
- Pennisetum glaucum* (millet)
- Setaria* (foxtail millet)
- Sorghum* (broom corn)

## FOLIAGE

- Andropogon* (big bluestem)
- Arundo* (giant reed)
- Leymus* (dune grass)
- Miscanthus* (maiden grass)
- Panicum* (switchgrass)
- Pennisetum* (fountain grass)
- Schizachyrium* (little bluestem)
- Xerophyllum* (bear grass)



## For more information:

Emerald Coast Growers, PO Box 10886, Pensacola, FL 32524 Ornamental grass liners Wholesale only 877-804-7277  
 The Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ascfg.org) MPO Box 268 Oberlin, OH 44074 440-774-2887  
*The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses and The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes*, Rick Darke  
*The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses*, John Greenlee