

Your garden in September - grasses

The glory of grasses

To most of us, grass means the humble lawn. However, grass is the most important of all plant families, especially to human economies. It includes the staple food grains such as wheat, rice, oats and barley; lawn and forage grasses; and bamboo, widely used for construction throughout Asia. It is estimated that grasslands comprise 20% of the vegetation cover of the earth.



In the garden, grasses should not be overlooked. They are invaluable for their texture and movement, and contrast beautifully with border perennials, many of which are their natural companions in the wild. As we move into autumn, their bleached golden colours, and their seed heads which sparkle in the low late summer sunlight, bring a magical quality to the garden.

Grasses are generally not fussy and will be happy in most soil conditions. They generally like sunny open positions with good light but there are some that tolerate shade, including many of the carex (technically a sedge rather than a grass), and *Stipa arundinacea*, an excellent evergreen grass which does well even in dry shade.

One of my favourites is *Stipa gigantea*. It gives height to a border, but in a light airy way that does not dominate. Plant it where it will catch the sun from all angles, and it will light up the garden. If you want to add height and drama, try *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' which has a very upright habit and can reach 2m. If you have youngsters, try *Pennisetum villosum* which has fluffy white caterpillars for flowers which children love to stroke.

Grasses will live happily in pots provided you keep them watered and fed. A good choice here is *Hakonechloa macra* *Albo aurea*, which has attractive gold variegated leaves and forms a magnificent mound of rippling movement.

Grasses can be both deciduous and evergreen. Deciduous grasses should be cut back in early spring, whilst evergreens can be thinned in the spring, removing dead material. Evergreens don't appreciate being cut back hard, but can be between May and August when they are in active growth.

Knoll Gardens in Dorset is a specialist grass nursery and a 4 acre garden demonstrating the use of grasses in the garden. See www.knollgardens.co.uk.

