

More Grasses for the Landscape

by JoJo Lindquist

Using grasses in the landscape adds a soft ephemeral quality that no other plant can provide. The movement of the grass blades in the wind, the shimmer of the setting sun on the individual leaves, and the soft halo of seed heads in the fall are all sights to remember. I can tell the changing of the seasons by some of the native grasses in my home garden. The grasses described in this article have been grown successfully in urban landscapes in Sarasota, but should grow statewide. Species of a variety of sizes are included so that you can select at least one to try in your garden.

Fakahatchee grass, *Tripsacum dactyloides* and sand-cordgrass, *Spartina bakeri*, are the largest species. Muhlygrass, *Muhlenbergia capillaris*, is the medium-sized grass and dwarf Fakahatchee grass, *Tripsacum floridana*, and purple-lovegrass, *Eragrostis spectabilis*, the shortest.

Fakahatchee grass, also known as eastern-gamagrass, is a robust perennial that grows in the fertile soils of hydric hammocks and pine flatwoods. Its ultimate size depends on the available water and fertility of the soil. In moist,

fertile sites, it is 5½ feet high and six feet wide. In a dry site, the grass is reduced to two feet tall and 2½ feet wide. None of the other grasses described have such a wide range of size.

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Spacing when planting is six feet apart in moist soils and three feet apart in dry. This medium textured grass has one-inch wide blades that softly cascade, making a graceful accent in any garden. The flower spikes rise

above the plant in mid-summer. I use them in flower arrangements as a vertical element. In moist soils, a few seedlings will grow and need to be removed, or the graceful grass

clump will be lost to overcrowding. Fakahatchee grass can be used as an accent in a bed of shorter plants, as a transition plant from uplands to a wetland or a lake, in mass plantings on a hillside, or as a hedgerow accent.



Muhlygrass, *Muhlenbergia capillaris*

Photo by JoJo Lindquist

Plant it where the wind can rustle through it.

Sand-cordgrass is a warm-season bunchgrass that grows four to five feet high and five feet wide. It grows vertically with the tips bending slightly. An old clump reminds me of Pampas grass without the saw-toothed blades. This fine-textured grass grows naturally in freshwater and saltwater marshes. Sand-cordgrass needs to be planted in an area that is moist year-round. The inflorescence is nondescript. Use sand-cordgrass as a lakeside accent plant in odd-numbered groupings, four to six feet apart, or singly as an accent plant. I've seen a very striking informal grouping (six feet plus apart) along a low area adjacent to a tidal creek.

Muhlygrass is a favorite in the fall, when it is covered in a 4½ foot high halo of purple inflorescence (September and October). This is a sight to be remembered when backlit with the afternoon sun. You can tell the seasons with this fine-textured bunchgrass. Spring and summer bring new green blades that look like a large cushion (three feet tall by three feet wide). Fall brings the



Fakahatchee grass

Photo by JoJo Lindquist

inflorescence and in winter, the whole plant turns golden brown. Perennial muhlygrass will grow on dry sandy beach fronts or moist inland sites. Its native habitats include coastal dunes, pine flatwoods, and sandhills. Use this grass in a sunny, mixed wildflower border, in mass plantings landward of the dunes mixed with beach sunflower, in mass plantings in parking lots and along the interstate, or scattered in an open meadow.

Dwarf Fakahatchee grass, or Florida gamagrass, is a fine-textured perennial bunchgrass with a fifteen-inch tall by twenty-inch wide drooping habit and no special inflorescence. This dwarf grass is widely adaptable, from full sun to light shade and moist to dry soils. Plant it twenty to twenty-four inches apart so that the cascading leaf blades can be seen. Dwarf Fakahatchee grass has performed well and is uniformly evergreen in the landscape. Use it as a low border to a bed, as a mass-planted groundcover, or in informal plant groupings in naturalized areas.

Purple-lovegrass is the lowest bunchgrass (eight inches high x twelve inches wide) in this group. It is a flat-bladed, medium-textured grass that forms a soft drooping clump. Late in the summer, this lovegrass is covered with a very attractive purple inflorescence that makes a puffball effect. Purple-lovegrass is widely distributed in Florida in longleaf pine, turkey oak hills, and

upland hardwood hammocks. It has grown in our area on very dry, hot sites and occasionally in wet pine flatwoods type of soil. It can be used as a groundcover and planted in small groups in informal areas.☀

Maintaining Native Grasses

Perennial bunchgrasses grow out from a central core and gradually expand over the years. These warm-season grasses grow actively March through September, with the growth time varying depending on locale. To continue to have full tufts of green grass, prune in February or March.

Here are some additional tips on grass care:

- Select a grass that grows to the desired size. Grasses grow fast to a predictable size and cannot be pruned to fit a smaller space.
- Plant grasses in a sunny location.
- Match the grass to existing water conditions.
- To renew a worn-out grass clump, cut it back close to the ground prior to the spring growth. Bunchgrasses over two years old are more vigorous looking with a "haircut" that allows new leaf blades space to grow.
- For more plants, divide old clumps early in the growing season, collect seeds, or look for seedlings to dig and transplant. Native plant nurseries and plant swaps at local FNPS chapter meetings are other potential sources.