NATIVE BUNCH GRASSES

Bunch grasses, often called “ornamental grasses”, are not the lawn grasses that reproduce by underground stems, or rhizomes. Bunch grasses clump and grow outward, expanding gradually; some put out seeds that may or may not sprout and grow. Our bunch grasses come from hills, meadows, coastlands, mountains, woodlands—in short, from a great variety of plant communities.

Native bunch grasses add wonderful shapes, colors, and textures to a garden. They can be delicate, graceful and soft, some so feathery you cannot help but reach out a hand to feel their plumes. Purple needle grass (*Nassella pulchra*), our California state grass, and nodding needle grass (*Nassella cernua*), both bloom with feathery awns. The needle grasses are cool season grasses, blooming in the winter and going dormant in the summer. Even in dormancy, they remain an attractive soft beige color, a perfect background for colorful perennials such as gum plants (*Grindelia stricta* var. *platyphylla*) or goldenrods (*Solidago californica*). Pacific hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa holciformis*) blooms in the spring and summer with airy clouds of green and gold inflorescences. Its winter dormancy is attractive with tan seed heads. These feathery grasses blend well with red-flowered buckwheat (*Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens*) or sulfur buckwheat (*Eriogonum umbellatum* var. *polyanthum*) with its bright yellow flat-topped flowers.

In contrast to the fluffy grasses, the upright stiff bunch grasses provide a solid background on which to spotlight a planting of native annuals, bulbs or perennials. Deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) becomes very large, up to 4 feet tall and around, spreading out from the center with long spiky flowering stems and tightly packed leaves. It needs room and full sun. Silver beardgrass (*Bothriochloa barbinodis*) blooms with silky panicles. California fescue (*Festuca californica*) and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) are two stiffly arching cool season grasses, the leaves of which are a silvery blue. The flowers may stand up to two to four feet above the plant; fescues do well in part-shade. Coast melic grass (*Melica imperfecta*), another cool season grass with tones of yellow in its leaves, would do well interplanted with purple-flowered coyote mints (*Monardella villosa*).

Grasses can be mixed in plantings of meadows with oaks, manzanitas and ceanothus, all of which provide habitat for pollinators and birds. California poppies are naturals interplanted with grasses; so too are our native coast irises (*Iris douglasiana*). Showy milkweeds (*Asclepias speciosa*) are a good choice, as are seathrift (*Armeria maritima*) and coast seaside daisies (*Erigeron glaucus*) that bloom in the summer with little water needed.

Bunch grasses may be classified as cool season or warm season plants. Temperature, light, and moisture generally govern their growth. Thus, a gardener needs to understand the bloom time of the grasses and make the appropriate choice as to where to plant them. It’s much easier to group drought-tolerant grasses with other drought-tolerant perennials, and keep the water guzzlers in a separate area. Grasses need little maintenance, are especially drought tolerant, do not require special soils or fertilizer, and are generally pest-free and deer-resistant, all of which contribute to their popularity. Dormant grasses, such as the needle grasses, can be cut back in the early summer after they flower, which is important in fire-prone areas. Others, when the seed heads are in their prime, may be left for their beauty, especially when interplanted with colorful perennials. Combing through the grasses with fingers, or a metal rake, is sometimes enough to pull out the old foliage. Be sure to wear gloves, as they often have sharp edges.

Beware of the highly invasive bunch grasses that are aliens to California and readily outcompete our native plants. Pampas grasses (*Cortaderis selloana* and *C. jubata*), take over entire hillsides to the exclusion of native buckwheats, sea thrift and seaside daisies. An invasive from Africa, fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*), which although quite beautiful, spreads its seeds everywhere. Some nurseries may still sell invasive bunch grasses and need to be informed of their dangers.

There are a fair number of books available on gardening with grasses. *California Native Plants for the Garden* by Bornstein, Fross, and O’Brien and *Designing Native California Gardens* by Keator and Middlebrook are excellent resources for names, photos, and descriptions of native grasses.

By Judy Brinkerhoff