

## Ornamental Grasses for New Mexico

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Grasses are not used as often as they could be in New Mexico gardens and landscapes. Annual or perennial, clumped or sod-forming, tall or short, native or exotic, grasses can be used in many places and all seasons.

In addition to the common use as lawns and turf, grasses can form borders, hedgerows, backdrops, screens, contrasts, add to a native landscape, or just be interesting and beautiful in their own right. Grasses are attractive, not only for their graceful and delicate flower clusters, but also for their alluring plumes, ornate foliage, and majestic tussocks.

There are several species, forms, and types of grasses useful in landscaping. Gardeners must consider shade or sun tolerance, invasiveness, water requirements, soil adaptations, winter hardiness, weedy potential, mode of propagation, and growth characteristics such as height and season when deciding on a landscape grass. Grasses with variegated foliage, for example, often blister or discolor when grown in full sunlight. Other

grasses spread by vigorous underground rhizomes, which limits their use to specific sites where this invasiveness will not be a problem. The type of garden, yard, or landscape desired must be considered carefully when choosing grasses, whether formal or informal, rock, mixed border, or water garden.

Grasses on the following pages are divided into size classes of short (up to 2 feet), medium (2 to 5 feet), and tall (more than 5 feet). The list includes both native and exotic species. Several are plentiful on the prairies, canyons, and mesas of New Mexico where seed or root stocks can be easily gathered. Many, including most exotic species, can be bought at commercial nurseries and seed companies. The common and scientific names, a description, planting and care, propagation, and landscaping and garden uses are given for each grass.

### Short Grasses (to 2 Feet Tall)

#### **Blue Fescue (*Festuca ovina* var. *glauca*)**

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 4 to 12 inches tall, forming blue-gray mounds 8 to 12 inches in diameter. Foliage leaves are threadlike and densely clumped in a small fountain shape. Flowers are in small heads above the foliage.

**Planting and care:** Blue fescue is a cool-season grass that can be grown throughout the state if well-watered in hot, dry areas. It thrives in diverse sites, in sun or shade and in moist or dry conditions, but needs extra water during hot weather. The center may die out in larger clumps and these should be split.

**Propagation:** By seed or division of large clumps.

**Uses:** Blue fescue can be used as a border in flower gardens, as a garden accent, and in hanging baskets or boxes. Several varieties are available.



### Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 1 to 2 feet tall, but with slowly spreading underground runners (rhizomes) that form a rough sod. Foliage is light green, low and dense. Flowers held in curving brushes atop slender stems. This is the state grass of New Mexico.

**Planting and care:** Blue grama is a warm-season grass. It is found naturally throughout New Mexico in a wide variety of soils and habitats, but thrives best in full sun on loamy or sandy loam soils. Clumps tend to die out in the center as they mature, sometimes forming so-called fairy rings. Seed is easily obtained commercially or can be gathered by hand. Sow in fall.

**Propagation:** By seed and plant division.

**Uses:** Blue grama is a native range grass, often used for low maintenance lawns because it requires little or no mowing. It also shows promise for dried arrangements, native landscaping, or edge effects along walks and gardens. A close relative, hairy grama (*Bouteloua hirsuta*), is more tolerant of drought and calcareous soils.



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### Foxtail Barley (*Hordeum jubatum*)

**Description:** Perennial, although sometimes short-lived, bunchgrass, 1 to 2 feet tall. Foliage is light green or greenish yellow. Flowers appear in attractive, golden yellow, long, bristly spikes, which break into windborne segments when dry.

**Planting and care:** Foxtail barley is a cool-season grass. It grows best in full sun on well-drained soils but will go dormant during hot periods in the desert areas. Sow during fall or, early spring, watering frequently. Plants may become weedy.

**Propagation:** By seed.

**Uses:** Foxtail barley is an extremely attractive plant when grown in dense clumps among broad-leaved ornamentals, or to add accents and contrasts to drives, rock gardens, and backdrops. The shattered seed heads may be a bit messy or troublesome.



### Indian Ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*)

**Description:** Perennial, densely tufted bunch grasses 1 to 2 feet tall. Foliage is light to bluish green and fine-leaved in arching sprays. Flowers are borne in stiffly branched, airy clusters, with hairy seeds protruding.

**Planting and care:** Indian ricegrass is a cool-season grass, growing during spring and fall. It thrives in full sun in dry, loose, sandy soil. It is drought-tolerant, but it is not suited to poorly drained sites.

**Propagation:** By seed, readily available from commercial sources, or it can be gathered from native plants.

**Uses:** Indian ricegrass is widely used for range restoration and erosion control. A clump of seed heads makes an attractive dried bouquet. Plants are suitable for rock gardens and native plant landscapes.



### Orchard-Grass (*Dactylis glomerata*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 2 to 4 feet tall, growing in small clumps or tussocks. Leaves are solid dark or medium green, or silvery striped in the variety 'Variegata'. Flowers are in stiff, greenish clusters at the tips of the stems.

**Planting and care:** Orchard grass is a cool-season grass from Europe that should be sown in fall or early spring. Flowering stalks can be clipped back to maintain attractive foliage growth. The striped form prefers partial shade and may turn brown in early fall.

**Propagation:** By seed, which is readily available, or by division of large clumps. Striped plants rarely produce seed heads.

**Uses:** The striped-leaved form makes an attractive border or cover for bare spots in a garden, or can be used as a small backdrop. This species is used extensively for forage in irrigated pastures and meadows.



### Purple Threeawn (*Aristida purpurea*)

**Description:** Perennial, densely tufted grasses 1 to 2 feet tall. Foliage is medium to light green and fine textured. Flowers are arrayed in plume like, nodding, purplish seed heads with long bristles,

**Planting and care:** Purple threeawn is a warm-season grass and prefers full sun in well-drained soils. It is extremely drought tolerant. Seed may be gathered from native plants throughout the plains, prairies, and desert areas of the state.

**Propagation:** By seed or plant division of large clumps.

**Uses:** Purple threeawn creates an attractive accent in native plant gardens. The delicate, purplish plumes contrast nicely with other foliage and background plants.



#### Rabbitfoot-Grass (*Polypogon monspeliensis*)

**Description:** Loosely tufted annuals 1 to 2 feet tall. Foliage is medium green, medium textured, with flat blades. Flowers are clustered in dense, furry rabbit-foot-like heads 2-6 inches long.

**Planting and care:** Rabbitfoot-grass is a cool-season grass that prefers full sun or light shade. It flourishes in fertile, moist to wet, well-drained soils around seeps, springs, irrigation ditches, ponds, and streams.

**Propagation:** By seed, which can be gathered from wild plants,

**Uses:** Rabbitfoot-grass is grown for the attractive seed heads, which are used in fresh and dried arrangements. It can also provide an accent for annual borders and in foreground mixes.



**Redtop** (*Agrostis stolonifera* & *A. gigantea*,  
syn. *A. alba*)

**Description:** Perennial, tufted grasses 1 to 2 feet tall. Some plants spread from underground runners (rhizomes) and form dense stands. Foliage is greenish yellow to bluish green, and fine textured. Flowers are displayed in delicate, reddish, pyramidal seed heads at the end of stems.

**Planting and care:** Redtop is a cool-season grass, preferring full sun and moist soils in mountain regions. Plants do not withstand hot, dry weather. Plants can be gathered in the mountains and along ditch banks in the cooler regions of the state.

**Propagation:** By seeds or root stocks, which should be sown or planted in spring.

**Uses:** Redtop is a widely used pasture grass throughout the United States, but it also makes an attractive addition to a mixed garden or meadow area with moist, loamy soils, or as a border along ponds or streams. It is most effective as an ornamental when planted in rather thick stands, which accents the feathery seed heads.



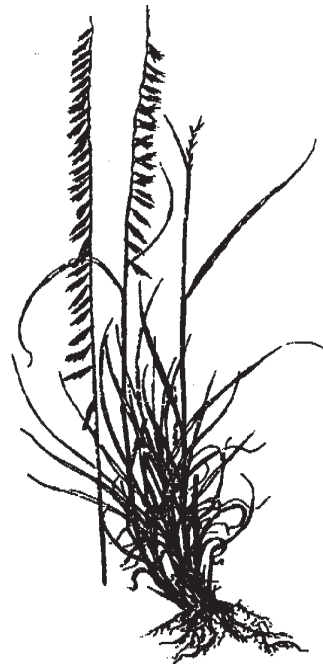
**Sideoats Grama** (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 1 to 2 feet tall. Foliage is light green, generally low, and rather coarse. Flowers are borne on little flags usually on one side of the slender stems (whence the name, sideoats), which break off and fall to the ground as the seed head matures.

**Planting and care:** Sideoats grama is a warm-season grass found naturally throughout most of New Mexico. It prefers full sun in calcareous soil and is drought tolerant. Clumps become a bit scraggly and coarse with age and should be thinned or divided.

**Propagation:** By seed, which should be sown in fall, or division of large clumps. Seed is available commercially.

**Uses:** The little flags of the seed heads make a delightful accent mixed in native landscapes, or as a backdrop or corner effect in rock and cactus gardens.



## Medium Grasses (2-5 Feet Tall)

### Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)

**Description:** Perennial, scraggly bunchgrasses 3 to 7 feet tall. Some plants also spread by underground runners (rhizomes), especially in sandy soil. Foliage is gray-green, turning reddish or purplish in the fall. Flowers are displayed in dark, turkeyfoot like branches rising above the leaves at the tips of the shoots.

**Planting and care:** Big bluestem, a common warm-season grass of the prairie and plains regions of the state, grows best in light, well-drained soils. With ample ground water, it thrives in hot, dry sites in full sun. The forms with underground runners must be contained.

**Propagation:** By seed or root stocks. The seed is easily available commercially or can be gathered by hand.

**Uses:** Big bluestem can be put to many landscaping uses, as a border, backdrop, screen, living fence or hedge, and to give fall colors. Dried seed heads are sometimes used in flower arrangements.



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### Canada Wildrye (*Elymus canadensis*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 2 to 5 feet tall. Leaves are flat, 4-8 inches long, bluish to gray-green. Flowers are clustered in nodding, bristly spikes raised above the foliage.

**Planting and care:** Canada wildrye is a cool-season grass that occurs naturally throughout the state, along streams and ditch banks. It thrives in full sun or light shade in moist, sandy or loamy soil.

**Propagation:** By seed and division of large clumps. Seed is available commercially or can be gathered by hand.

**Uses:** The foxtail-like flowering clusters and bluish-green foliage make an attractive contrast, backdrop, or accent.



### Fountain-Grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*, syn. *P. ruppelii*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass in rounded clumps 2 to 4 feet tall and 2 feet in diameter. Foliage is a rusty green, with straight to arching leaves. Flowers are displayed in fuzzy, straw-colored to coppery-pink spikes at the ends of the stiff stems.

**Planting and care:** Fountain-grass is a warm-season grass that is adapted to a wide variety of soils and growing conditions. It thrives in full sun, endures drought well, and flourishes in poor, gravelly soils. Plants will go dormant during winter, resuming vigorous growth in early summer. It is a prolific seeder and may invade adjacent-open ground. Large clumps will die out in the center and should be divided.

**Propagation:** By seed or division of large tussocks. Potted plants are available commercially.

**Uses:** Fountain-grass is an extremely attractive ornamental for rock gardens, at pool-side, and as border plantings. It flowers through mid- to late-summer and the coppery foliage provides fall and winter color. This is an excellent ornamental grass for dry low-maintenance areas, such as gravel beds, median strips, and road sides.

### Indian-Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)

**Description:** Perennial, loosely tufted or short creeping grasses from underground runners (rhizomes), growing 3 to 6 feet tall. Foliage is light or bluish green, somewhat coarse, and turns orange or purplish after frost. The fuzzy seed heads are rusty, coppery, or bronze-colored, with delicate bristles.

**Planting and care:** Indian-grass is a warm-season grass native to the Great Plains. It thrives in full sun in a variety of soils, but prefers moist, well-drained sites. Plants reseed themselves readily.

**Propagation:** By seed, root stocks, or division of large clumps. Seed is readily available commercially.

**Uses:** Indian-grass is useful in mixed stands, in native plant gardens and naturalized areas bordering the garden or yard. Dense stands make attractive screens and hedges.



### Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 2 to 4 feet tall. Foliage is pale green, turning various shades of red in the fall. Flowers are arranged in silky, hairy branches scattered among the foliage.

**Planting and care:** Little bluestem is a drought tolerant, warm season grass found naturally throughout nearly all of New Mexico, except for the drier desert areas. The plants are also winter hardy and accept a variety of soils and water conditions, but do best in full sun and rather dry soils.

**Propagation:** By seed, which is available commercially, or can be gathered by hand, and by division of large clumps.

**Uses:** Little bluestem is an attractive grass for native plant gardens, borders and accents, and dried arrangements.



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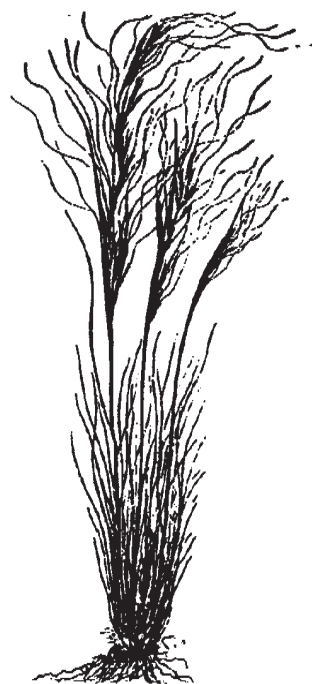
### New Mexico Needle-and-Thread (*Stipa neomexicana*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 1 to 3 feet tall. Foliage is light green, fine textured, and somewhat weepy. Flowers droop in loose, bristly clusters. The seeds are hard and needle-shaped, with a long bristle covered with silvery hairs.

**Planting and care:** New Mexico needle-and-thread will thrive in loose, well-drained, lime soils. The plants are cool-season, but also drought tolerant.

**Propagation:** By seed or division of large clumps. Seed is not available commercially, but can be gathered from wild populations on plains and mesas in late spring or early summer.

**Uses:** Though rarely used as an ornamental, New Mexico needle and-thread makes an excellent addition to native plant gardens, right-of-ways, and wild areas next to gardens, yards, and drives.





### Wild Oats (*Avena barbata* and *A. fatua* var. *sativa*)

**Description:** Annual bunchgrass 2 to 3 feet tall. Foliage is light to medium green and drooping. The beauty of the plant derives from the delicate, dangling flower clusters with their protruding bristles.

**Planting and care:** Wild oats are cool-season grasses that will do well during spring and early summer, but will die out with the summer heat in the southern areas, persisting a bit longer in the north. Plants are tolerant of a wide variety of soils, as long as moisture is available.

**Propagation:** By seed, available commercially or easily gathered by hand along roadsides and fields. Sow in spring in full sun.

**Uses:** Wild oats are considered pests of fields and waste places, but these common weeds add a striking contrast to other ornamentals when planted in dense tufts scattered throughout the garden. The flower clusters are used in dried arrangements.



### Ribbon-Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta*)

**Description:** Perennial bunch grass with underground runners (rhizomes), 3 to 6 feet tall. The ample, green foliage is banded lengthwise with white and yellow, occasionally pinkish, stripes. Flowers are displayed in dense, straw-colored clusters above the foliage at the tips of the stems.

**Planting and care:** Ribbon-grass is quite drought tolerant and will thrive in variety of soils. It is a cool season grass, however, and flourishes in moist to wet ground in full sun. The plants will spread from the underground runners if left uncontained in moist soil. They do well in submerged pots or tubs in a water garden.

**Propagation:** By seed or root stocks.

**Uses:** The striped leaves of ribbon-grass add an attractive backdrop, hedge, or corner fill, especially in wetter sites.



### Switch-Grass (*Panicum virgatum*)

**Description:** Perennial, tussock-forming grass spreading by underground runners (rhizomes), mostly 3 to 5 feet tall, occasionally taller. The long leaves are medium green to bronze, drooping and giving a fountain effect. Flowers are displayed in attractive, reddish clusters.

**Planting and care:** Switch-grass prefers loamy soil, full sun, and plenty of water. It is a warm-season grass, but is hardy except in extremely cold areas. The underground runners invade adjacent ground in light, sandy soils, but less so in heavier soils.

**Propagation:** By seed, which is available commercially, and root Stocks, both of which can be gathered from plains and prairie meadows.

**Uses:** Switch-grass plantings make an effective backdrop, border, screen, windbreak, or large accent. Seed heads are used occasionally in cut flower arrangements. Switch-grass is most attractive when grown in dense stands, and also provides wildlife cover and bird seed. There are several varieties of this species.



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### Timothy (*Phleum pratense*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 2 to 5 feet tall. Foliage is gray-green to blue-green. Flowers are elevated above the foliage in dense, cylindrical, pencil-like spikes 2-5 inches long.

**Planting and care:** Timothy is a cool-season grass. It requires well-drained, loamy soil, and flourishes in both sun or shade.

**Propagation:** By seed, which is readily available commercially or can be gathered by hand. Sow in fall or spring.

**Uses:** Timothy is a widely used pasture grass, imported from Europe. This species makes an attractive mix with other grasses for a wild meadow look or for spot effects and accents in moist gardens. The flower stalks can be used in dried arrangements.



### Weeping Lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*)

**Description:** Perennial, densely-tufted bunchgrass 2 to 4 feet tall. The foliage is dark green, with fine, arching leaves. Flowers are in olive-green clusters rising above the leaves.

**Planting and care:** Weeping lovegrass is a warm-season grass that prefers full sun in clay to sandy soils, but is adapted to a variety of conditions. It is extremely drought tolerant. Large clumps should be cut back in the spring.

**Propagation:** By seed, which is readily obtained commercially, or division of large plants.

**Uses:** Weeping lovegrass is native to Africa and is widely used in the Southwest for erosion control and range rehabilitation. Grown for its symmetrical mounds with cascading foliage, it is useful in rock gardens as a scattered accent or background plant, mid-size border or hedge, and small screen or windbreak.



### Tall Grasses (More Than 5 Feet Tall)

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#### Bamboo (mostly *Phyllostachys* species)

**Description:** Bushy perennials 5 to 25 feet tall or more. Many of the species develop strong underground root stocks (rhizomes) that vigorously invade adjacent ground. Stems are flattened on one side, woody, hollow between the joints, and usually with two branches at each joint. Foliage is dense and light green. Bamboo plants are not known to flower in New Mexico, being cultivated strictly for their foliage.

**Planting and care:** Bamboos are technically cool-season grasses and cold hardy to about 20°F, but they do best in the southern portions of state. They take drought fairly well. Some species are extremely invasive and care must be taken to confine these plants to pots or sunken vats.

**Propagation:** By root stocks and potted plants, obtained through commercial nurseries.

**Uses:** Bamboo makes an excellent hedge, screen, or windbreak, or sets off a corner accent. There are several varieties to choose from, with assorted sizes,

**Common Reed** (*Phragmites australis*, syn. *P. communis*)

**Description:** Perennial, canelike plants that spread vigorously from underground runners (rhizomes), producing large, dense stands. Stems are bamboolike, 8 to 16 feet tall. Foliage is medium green or greenish yellow, coarse; one selection has variegated leaves. Flowers are displayed in silky plumes atop the stems. Plants are sometimes confused with giant reed, which is generally a taller, coarser plant with larger panicles.

**Planting and care:** Common reed is a cool-season grass, but flowers throughout the growing season. Plants do best in low, wet areas, such as pond and stream banks, springs, and boggy ground. Careful planning is required to keep plants from invading and dominating the landscape, especially in sandy ground.

**Propagation:** By root stocks, which are readily available from wet habitats throughout New Mexico.

**Uses:** Common reed forms dense thickets in wetland areas, providing habitat for wildlife. Plantings should be restricted to large, open areas and are useful as living fences, windbreaks, screens, and accents against ponds and streams. The silky plumes persist through the winter and are employed in dried arrangements.



## Corn (*Zea mays*)

**Description:** Annual, though robust, bunchgrasses 4 to 10 feet tall. Stems are thick and cane-like. Leaves become large, to 2 feet long and 3 inches wide, usually some shade of green, but with tinges of purple, red, or yellow in the ornamental cultivars. Male flowers are arranged in tassels at the tops of the stems. Female flowers are produced in ears or cobs hidden among the leaves, with the silk (pollen gathering stigmas) protruding out of the husk. Ornamental strains with varicolored kernels are known as Calico, Indian, Squaw, or Rainbow corn.

**Planting and care:** Corn is a warm-season grass requiring full sun and deep, rich soils with good drainage. Do not mix sweet corn popcorn or ornamental corn. Plant rows 3 feet apart and thin plants to 1 foot apart. Water and fertilize well. Allow ornamental corn to ripen completely until the kernels are hard, gather the ears with 1 inches of stalk, pull back the husk, leaving it attached, and dry thoroughly.

**Propagation:** By seed.

**Uses:** Variegated strains of corn are grown mostly for

their foliage, while cultivars with colorful ears are used in dried floral arrangements and as door or wall decorations. Plantings make useful backdrops, screens, and provide fall colors and accents. Cultivated crop races include dent, field, pop, and sweet corn.

## Eulalia (*Miscanthus sinensis*)

**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 4 to 10 feet tall.

Foliage is fountainlike, medium green, turning reddish in the fall. There is considerable variation among numerous cultivars in size, shape, color, and flowering characteristics. Variety *variegatus* has striped leaves and variety *zebrinus* has banded leaves. Flowers arise at the tops of the stems in silky fan-shaped panicles.

**Planting and care:** *Eulalia* is a warm-season grass requiring full or partial sun and good soil moisture. It will do best in the southern, warmer areas of the state.

**Propagation:** By seed or division of large plants.

**Uses:** *Eulalia* can be used for screens, backdrops, windbreaks, and corner accents in large yards. Its ornamental value extends into fall and winter. The seed heads are used in dried arrangements.



### Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*)

**Description:** Perennial, canelike grasses 8 to 25 feet

tall. Plants form dense colonies or thickets from the underground root stocks (rhizomes), which vigorously invade adjacent ground. Stems are thick, hollow, and bamboolike. The plants are often mistaken for bamboos, sugar-cane, or common reed. Leaves are corn-like to 2 feet long and 3 inches wide. Cultivar 'Versicolor' ('Variegate') is a smaller plant with leaves striped in yellow or white. Flowers are displayed in giant, silvery, plumelike panicles at the tips of the stems.

**Planting and care:** Giant reed is a semitropical grass that needs rich, well-drained, moist soil. It can be used throughout the state, but does best in the warmer climates, and may not flower in the northern areas. The roots must be protected with mulch in cold-winter areas. Plants are extremely invasive, and should be located after careful planning.

**Propagation:** By root stocks or stem cuttings.

**Uses:** Giant reed can provide effective screens, fences, windbreak, and large borders. Thickets will dominate the landscape and must be carefully positioned in the landscape.



### Pampas-Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*)

**Description:** Perennial, evergreen grasses forming

giant clumps to 12 feet tall and 6 feet in diameter. Leaves are medium to bluish green, sawtooth-edged, long and weeping. Flowers arise in massive, silky, silvery plumes, raised above the foliage on long stalks; those of female plants are most attractive. There are several varieties that vary in plant size, vigor, winter hardiness, and foliage and flower color.

**Planting and care:** Pampas-grass is a cool-season plant that prefers full sun in fertile, well-drained soils, but does not do well in cold, clay soils. It is hardy only in the plains, prairie, and desert portions of the state, but is tolerant of drought, wind, and neglect. Plants are fast growing and are not easy to keep small; burning periodically might help.

**Propagation:** By division of large clumps. Plants produce seed poorly.

**Uses:** Pampas-grass provides windbreaks, fences, and corner accents in large lawn areas. The plumes are attractive in cut flower arrangements. Plant carefully because the giant tussocks will dominate the landscape.

#### **Ravenna-Grass (*Saccharum ravennae*, syn. *Erianthus ravennae*)**

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**Description:** Perennial bunchgrass 6 to 12 feet tall. Foliage is dense, medium green, and scattered along the stems. The leaves droop at the tips, turning light brown, tan, or beige in the fall. Flowers are arranged in dense, silky, silvery to reddish panicles at the tops of the stems, giving the plant a pampas-grass effect.

**Planting and care:** Ravenna-grass is a warm-season grass, preferring full sun in well-drained, moist to wet soil. Plants are hardy throughout the state, but die-back during winter and lack of flowering should be expected in the colder regions.

**Propagation:** By seed and division of large clumps, the latter preferred.

**Uses:** Ravenna-grass makes an excellent screen, living fence, backdrop, or corner accent in large yards. The plumes are useful in dried arrangements.







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