

Choosing the Right Grasses and Wildflowers



Tag Tips:

- Scientific Latin name of one or two words, for example *Aster laevis*.
- "Zone" numbers, i.e., 3 means better adaptation to colder temperatures than 4.
- Sun, partial sun, or shade tells you the sunlight requirements and correct placement in the landscape.
- Water requirements in inches per year should fit natural, local precipitation amounts.

Plant Adaptation

Select plants that are naturally adapted to survive in local environmental conditions.

- Reputable nurseries and garden centers choose native and introduced plant material that is adapted to the area. A plant's adaptation to a certain environment can be researched. However, the only way to ensure a plant's true identity is by the scientific name, which provides positive identification of the species. Common names vary in time, place, and culture.
- When purchasing plants and seed, be on the lookout for information on winter hardiness. The best indicator is a designated USDA Winter Hardiness Zone listed on the tag or label. Ask questions about local adaptation and the plant's origin. Plants or seed from a milder climate or a more southern location may not be hardy.
- Replacement guarantees may be available and will vary from within six months up to one year from purchase. Guarantees are limited by the fact that proper plant care after purchase is beyond the control of the seller.
- Digging and transplanting plants from the wild into a home landscape is usually unsuccessful. Wildland plants have extensive root systems and often have special needs that cannot be retained. In many places, it is illegal to dig plants in the wild.



Black Sampson echinacea, a native wildflower, is grown and sold at many nurseries.

Plant Attributes and Features

When choosing plants, strive for contrast, harmony and boldness to provide interesting variety throughout the year. It will take time for plants to mature, so allow plenty of room for growth. Perennials are plants that live longer than two years and life spans range from just a few years, up to many years. Longevity is often referred to as short- or long-lived.

Nature's Defenses

- Hairy, sticky or wavy leaf surfaces deflect wind and channel water droplets.
- Short, narrow, incised leaves have smaller surface area and lose less water to evaporation.
- White or silvery-colored leaves reflect the sun's rays and modify leaf temperatures.
- Spines, prickles, and aromatic foliage defend against loss of stem tissue and moisture from hungry, thirsty predators.
- Small, less showy flowers with little or no fragrance attract less attention from predaceous insects and grazing animals.

- Herbaceous perennials** grow and die back to the soil surface every year.
- Woody perennials** are trees and shrubs that persist above ground year after year.
- Annual and biennial** life spans require replanting every one or two years.

Some plants have developed strategies to cope with low-water environments. These are defense mechanisms designed to gather and preserve precious water. Look for plants with leaves that are fuzzy, light-colored, seem blue-tinged, or have spines.

Garden Attractions

- Fragrance*
- Wildlife enhancements*
- Herbs or medicinals*
- Color schemes or seasonal bloom schedules*
- Recreation of natural habitats*



Northern oriole in cottonwood trees.



Tortoiseshell butterfly feeding on senecio blossom.

Plant Types

Grasses



Bluebunch wheatgrass.



Sheep fescue.



Little bluestem used as ornamental.

Grasses are common components in a landscape. They reproduce by seed and above- or below-ground stems. Grasses can be compact and tufted, erect in bunches, creeping on the ground's surface, or spreading as sod. Height varies from ground-hugging to several feet tall.

- Cool-season species green up early and actively grow from spring until mid-summer.
- Warm-season species begin growth in early summer and remain active until mid-autumn. In fall they have attractive foliage and are generally the most attractive grasses of the season.

Wildflowers



Black Sampson echinacea.



Purple prairieclover.



Aster.



Two varieties of penstemon.



Arnica.



Phacelia.



Lupine.

Some wildflowers require direct sunlight for 6 to 8 hours per day. As sunlight decreases, plant height and bloom size decrease. Bloom season and duration of bloom vary, so coordinate the extension and overlap to ensure interesting color throughout the entire growing season.