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Native Bunchgrasses: A Natural Alternative to Turf



"In gardening circles, an appreciation of grasses has become a distinguishing characteristic of the sophisticated gardener."

—Rufino Osorio, author of *A Gardener's Guide to Florida Native Plants*

The Trouble with Turfgrass

Concerns about drought, water shortages, and the health effects of lawn chemicals have caused many of us to take a hard look at our lawns. Florida's climate and soils are not generally suitable for most turfgrass choices. As a result, regular irrigation and fertilizing is often required to maintain a plush green lawn look. From an ecological perspective, traditional mowed turfgrass lawns are often sterile and can be injurious to our health and the health of wildlife. A vast expanse of turfgrass offers no biodiversity to support beneficial insects, songbirds or other elements of our natural environment. The fertilizers and pesticides used in turf maintenance can be toxic to wildlife and pollute our water supply.

The Solution is Natural

So, is there an attractive, environmentally friendly alternative to turfgrass as a ground-cover? Yes. Florida has an abundance of native wildflowers and ornamental bunchgrasses that can be used to replace large areas of turf. And bunchgrass seeds are excellent sources of food for seed-eating birds. Award-winning landscape architect, JoJo Lindquist of Sarasota, notes that "bunchgrasses in the landscape add a soft, ephemeral quality that no other plant can provide. The movement of 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 ... I can tell the changing of the seasons by the native grasses in my home garden."

Florida's small native bunchgrasses range mostly in heights of 16" to 24." Many are great for dry sandy landscape coverage. They can be used in generous rolls, rifts and layers, duplicating the predominance of bunchgrasses in natural habitats such as prairies and flatwoods. Use bunchgrasses to create a flowing framework around an otherwise diverse selection of plants. Mimic nature by inserting native wildflowers between your bunchgrass clumps and you'll keep weeds down, attract some colorful butterflies, feed the birds, and produce a gorgeous meadow to please passersby.

—Continued on the other side

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the Real Florida Since 1980.*

Some Native Bunchgrasses to Consider

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Spread	Area of Florida	Habitat	Light Conditions
Broomsedge	<i>Andropogon virginicus</i> var. <i>virginicus</i>	2-4'	upright	throughout Florida	flatwoods, fields and roadside	full sun
Chalky Bluestem	<i>Andropogon virginicus</i> var. <i>glaucus</i>	3-5'	upright	throughout Florida	moist slopes in scrub and pinelands	full sun
Elliott's Lovegrass	<i>Eragrostis elliottii</i>	12-24"	12-24"	throughout Florida	flatwoods, sandhills, prairies and disturbed sites	full sun to dappled shade
Fakahatchee Grass	<i>Tripsacum dactyloides</i>	2-3'	3-5'	throughout Florida	hammocks, swamps and disturbed wet sites	full sun to part shade
Florida Gamagrass	<i>Tripsacum floridanum</i>	12-24"	12-24"	South Florida	pinelands	full sun to dappled shade
Lopsided Indian Grass	<i>Sorghastrum secundum</i>	3-6'	upright and leaning	throughout Florida	flatwoods and sandhills	full sun to dappled shade
Muhly grass	<i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i> var. <i>capillaris</i>	2-3'	3-4'	throughout Florida	flatwoods and marshes	full sun to dappled shade
Purple Lovegrass	<i>Eragrostis spectabilis</i>	12-24"	12-24"	throughout Florida	flatwoods, sandhills, lake shores and disturbed sites	full sun to dappled shade
Sand Cordgrass	<i>Spartina bakeri</i>	3-5'	3-5'	throughout Florida	wet prairies and pinelands, marshes	full sun
Sea Oats	<i>Uniola paniculata</i>	3-5'	upright	penninsular Florida	beach dunes	full sun
Wiregrass	<i>Aristida stricta</i> var. <i>beyrichiana</i>	2-3'	2-3'	throughout Florida	flatwoods, sandhills, and sloughs	full sun to dappled shade

These and many other species and varieties may be found at native nurseries and plant sales sponsored by your local Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society.

References

For more descriptive information on Florida's native bunchgrasses and their use in the landscape, consult the following:

A Gardener's Guide to Florida's Native Plants, Rufino Osorio, University Press of Florida, 2001.
Common Grasses of Florida and the Southeast, Lewis L. Yarlett, Florida Native Plant Society, 1996.
Florida's Best Native Landscape Plants, Gil Nelson, University Press of Florida, 2003.
The Palmetto, Special Issue on Native Grasses, Vol. 16, No. 1, Florida Native Plant Society, 1996.

Additional Resources

Wondering whether that ornamental grass is native? Check the *Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida*, Wunderlin and Hansen, 2nd. ed., University Press of Florida or visit www.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Check with members of your local FNPS Chapter to find out which bunchgrasses work best in your area.

For commercial sources of Florida native bunchgrasses, contact the Association of Florida Native Nurseries (www.afnn.org).