

HOW TO PRUNE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

So the ornamental grasses have been enjoyed for their winter interest, lending height, movement and even brandishing some long season color, but the question arises when and how to prune them back. The tall seed stalks have done their job to insulate the crown of the plants during the cold winter months and even providing some seeds for the wildlife. Before new growth in the spring, it is now time to prune them back.

Warm season grasses which begin to flourish in late spring and early summer and begin to flower in mid-summer can actually be pruned back anytime after they turn brown and the temperatures begin to dive in the fall. Cool season grasses, which begin to grow in early spring before temperatures rise above 75* F and again thrive and bloom in the fall, should be pruned back in early spring before new growth begins to emerge. The rule of thumb is to prune back any ornamental grasses before new green growth begins and prevents trimming back new shoots.

Sturdy gloves are recommended for all grass pruning since grass stalks can be very sharp to the touch. Smaller ornamental grasses can be sheared with bypass pruners, one handful at a time and placed in a container. Larger grasses may require pruning shears or even electric or gas-powered hedge trimmers, especially if several plants need to be pruned. Very large grass clumps may even be pruned with weed-eaters, the blade type, not the ones with string. On larger grasses it is feasible and makes the work go faster and easier if a bungy cord, biodegradable tape or even a small rope is first placed around the plant so the pruned material remains together in a sheath. The tethers can then be removed after placing the pruned part of the grass in the compost pile, and voila! Clean-up is a breeze (especially if we ever have any wind in Oklahoma!!)

Warm season grasses benefit from a pruning of 4-6 inches from the ground, while cool season grasses should only be pruned 2/3 of the plant down, allowing 1/3 of the grass to remain, to prevent harm to the plant. Sometimes it is advisable to divide ornamental grasses just before new growth begins in early spring if

noticeable die-back is seen in the center of the grass clump. Division can be done simply after the grass is pruned back by using a straight shooter shovel around one edge of the center die-back and further dividing with a sharp trowel, knife, or shovel after removing from the ground. Make sure healthy roots are included with each new plant, trim away any dead roots, replant each section in its new location and water thoroughly.