

Cut Back and Divide Ornamental Grasses Now

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Ornamental grasses are an important part of tri-state landscapes. They tolerate a wide range of environmental conditions, are relatively pest-free, and provide beauty and interest for nearly the entire year.

One of the most important tasks for growing ornamental grasses is to cut back the dead foliage in late winter. Physical removal of dead foliage is a substitute for the natural processes of grazing and prairie fires. Few of us have bison in our yards to graze the grasses back into shape. And burning a prairie grass in an urban environment is generally not considered a Good Idea: it is dangerous, causes unhealthy smoke, and is most likely illegal in your community.

Ornamental grasses should be cut back just before the new season's growth begins to appear. In the Evansville area, this is usually late February or early March. Waiting too long will cause some minor aesthetic injury to the new shoots. Earlier is definitely better with these plants.

Most grasses should be cut to a few inches above the ground. This can be done to the shorter and softer grasses with hand pruners or a string trimmer. However, the larger species can have thick, woody stems that can only be cut with string trimmer with a blade attachment, a pruning saw, or a chainsaw.

The cut foliage can be used as mulch in the garden. Many gardeners will run it through a leaf shredder first, to make smaller pieces that break down more quickly, but I usually lay it cross-wise in my garden, at most breaking the stems in half. The cut foliage can also be shredded and added to the compost pile; consider it to be a "brown" material, and add grass clippings, manure, or a small amount of fertilizer to help it rot.

This is also a good time to divide and transplant ornamental grass clumps. As with other perennials, often the center of large, overgrown clumps will die out. Dividing lets us discard the dead parts, and invigorate the smaller pieces. Dividing will also reduce the size of overgrown clumps, and allow them to be moved or shared.

Dividing the larger grasses, such as prairie cord, ribbon grass, or most of the species of *Miscanthus*, will require a sharp axe or saw, a shovel, and a strong back. Some clumps may require the use of a backhoe, which can be rented from some equipment companies locally. Divide the plant into pieces no wider than a 5-gallon bucket. There should be multiple tillers (stems) in each clump. You can break them into smaller pieces, but it will take them longer to reach mature size. Keep newly divided plants moist and shaded until planted in their new location.

Be sure to wear thick gardening gloves and long-sleeved shirts when working with ornamental grasses. The sharp edges of the grass blades can cause wicked paper cuts, and the debris can cause skin irritation.

For more information on growing and caring for ornamental grasses, contact the Purdue Extension Service in Vanderburgh County at (812) 435-5287.