

Ornamental Grasses and Sedges

by Sally Cureton

Driving around Massanutten Village, you may have seen some yards with plantings of ornamental grasses. It isn't just here, but in many places these plants are becoming more popular as a landscaping alternative. And they do offer numerous attractions with their interesting textures and durability. Many ornamental grasses are tough, yet beautiful plants. They often offer year-round color and interest in a yard. In addition, a native grass provides valuable food and shelter to birds, small animals and other wildlife. Most ornamental grasses prefer full sun and moist sites, but there are some that will thrive under shady and dry conditions.

One of these grasses that will tolerate light to part shade is Bottle-Brush Grass (*Hystrix patula*). This plant will grow anywhere from 2-5 feet in height, blooming June through August. A native perennial, it tolerates a dry site. Another alternative would be Switch Grass (*Panicum virgatum*). This plant grows in big leafy clumps producing purple flowers which then turn tan. The clumps last through the winter and the dried flowers can really help to provide a touch of brightness on a dark rainy day. Even though it likes full sun, it is very drought tolerant. Switch Grass holds up well in the snow and provides food and shelter for many songbirds.

Another group of grass-like plants is the sedges. Although they generally grow in wet places, because most of them prefer some shade, there are some that will do well in our environment. Sedges, like grasses, have long, narrow leaves. But sedges usually have a triangular solid stem. Grasses have a round hollow stem. Sedges have three rows of leaves, and grasses have but two. A sedge that will do well in light to full shade is Plantainleaf Sedge (*Carex plantaginea*). It has bright green leaves with dark purple sheaths. This is actually a great plant for a shady spot with the added plus that it tolerates a wide range of soil conditions.

Another sedge to consider is Gray's Sedge (*Carex grayi*). This plant needs light to part shade in a moist site. It will grow to about 2 to 2-½ feet tall and is known to attract butterflies. Its seeds are a fairly important food source for several birds. One distinct advantage of all sedges is that white-tail deer rarely bother them. Also available, of course, are many non-native grasses and sedges such as Pampas and Fountain grass. Those described above are all native plants.

