

Ornamental Grasses

Introduction

Ornamental grasses have become popular for use in commercial and homeowner landscapes. Native tall prairie grasses (such as switchgrass and big bluestem), as well as many introduced species, are included in this group. Attractive foliage, showy flowers and distinctive seed heads can also make many annual and perennial grasses suitable for fresh and dried floral arrangements. Plant material sold as ornamental grasses may include sedges and rushes, as well as true grasses.

Marketing

Container-grown and bareroot ornamental grasses may be produced by nurseries for several different markets. Retail sales include garden centers as well as landscape nurseries with retail outlets. A demonstration garden of ornamental grasses growing with other perennials can enhance retail sales. Ornamental grasses can also be sold locally at retail prices at farmers markets. Grasses produced for wholesale markets are sold to other nurserymen, landscapers or retailers. Bareroot plant material can be sold and shipped nationwide via mail order and Internet markets. Material for floral arrangements can be marketed to florists, craft stores and farmers markets.

Market Outlook

The high demand for ornamental grasses is at least partially due to their problem-free, low maintenance reputation. The diversity of plant material available, along with their unique visual quality, has added



to their popularity. Their usage in commercial and home landscapes is expected to increase. Selling only plants native to Kentucky or adapted to area growing conditions is essential to local sales.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Ornamental grasses are easily propagated by division for commercial production. Plants can be produced either in above-ground containers with soilless growing media or field-grown in a wide range of soil types. A sunny site with good air circulation and a slightly sloping topography is best for field production. Poorly drained sites and/or overwatering should be avoided. Lodging (plants falling over) can be a problem under high fertility or excessive shade. This can be limited by early season cutting or reduced fertilization.

Many ornamental grasses are cut back to within a few inches of ground level before the new season's growth appears, while evergreen types require the removal of old flower



stalks. Some ornamental grasses are invasive, either from underground rhizomes (such as, ribbongrass) or from self-seeding (particularly some *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars). Invasive cultivars should be used cautiously.

Pest management

Ornamental grasses are generally regarded as disease- and insect-free in landscapes; however, some pest problems are beginning to appear occasionally in commercial production. Insect and disease management requires IPM strategies, such as scouting, and practicing best management practices. Weeds, which are of particular concern in producing grasses, can be controlled in nurseries using a combination of hand weeding, mowing, mechanical cultivation, mulching, ground cloth, planting cover crops and chemical methods.

Harvest

The time it takes for plants to reach a saleable size will vary; however, some grasses can grow to marketable size within 12 weeks. Field-grown plants may be harvested as either bareroot plants or moved to containers. The length of time a plant can be grown in a container is limited. Once unsold plants outgrow their container, they will have to be repotted to a larger container, divided into smaller units, or discarded.

Labor requirements

The level of management for container-grown plants is significantly higher than in field production. A common rule of thumb is to employ one worker per actual acre of container production or one employee per 7 to 8 acres of field production.

Economic Considerations

Ornamental grasses can be very profitable additions to an existing nursery operation. Compared to most other stock, ornamental grasses cost less to grow to a saleable size. This

can create very attractive price premiums for the grower.

Because of lower costs of production, pricing and marketing are the key economic elements in ornamental grass production. Novice customers will likely be unaware of the benefits, such as texture and movement, that ornamental grasses offer to landscapes. This creates an opportunity for higher pricing points targeting experienced or more discriminating consumers. Ornamental grass growers should budget for additional marketing expenses and efforts to sell the product since ornamental grasses look quite different at maturity than they do at the time of planting.

University of Kentucky budget estimates show nearly identical total costs between in-ground and above-ground systems of ornamental grass production. The UK estimates indicate that producers able to utilize existing equipment and capital for in-ground ornamental grass production can realize up to 30 percent in variable cost savings compared to a container production system.

More Information

- Ornamental Grasses for Kentucky Landscapes (University of Kentucky, 1993)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho79/ho79.pdf>
- Ornamental Grasses and Sedges as New Crops (Purdue University, 2002)
<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/ncnu02/v5-473.html>
- Ornamental Grasses in the Landscape, PB-1626 (University of Tennessee, 1999)
<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/pbfiles/PB1626.pdf>
- Retail Reflections: Promoting Poaceae (North Carolina State University)
www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/floriculture/RR/pdf/orn_grasses/ornamental_grasses.pdf