

Australian Grasses, Sedges & Rushes

These plants have become increasingly popular in landscaping, adding beauty, form, colour and texture variations to the garden.

- There are many attractive Australian species worth considering, that are well suited to our local conditions.
- They attract birds, providing seeds and shelter for small birds.
- Grasses are safe to grow near waterways as they need very little fertilising.
- Most produce attractive heads of seeds, which can be dried and used in floral arrangements.
- After flowering and seeding has finished, many of the tufted grasses benefit from being cut back to near ground level.

Listed below is a small selection of plants that you may find at specialist nurseries or by request from your local nursery.

Grasses

Grasses make a lovely display when several of the same species are grouped together to achieve a natural look. Some suggested grasses that will grow in a variety of habitats on the Central Coast include:

- **Long-leaf wallaby grass**, *Austrodanthonia longifolia*, grows in poor sandy soils to 60cm. Flowering spring- summer.
- **Feather speargrass**, *Austrostipa elegantissima*, an attractive grass to 40cm with feathery heads of pinkish coloured flowers. Likes a dry spot with full sun.
- **Barbed wire grass**, *Cymbopogon refractus*. This is a most unusual grass growing in a tufted clump to 1m and does well in heavy soils of low fertility. An interesting grass with fragile seed heads. Leaves have a ginger like odour when crushed. Looks attractive grown in a container.
- **Short-hair plume grass**, *Dichelachne micrantha*, growing 50-70cm. in height, grows best in an open sunny position in sandy soil. Very showy when in flower with its fine silky tips tinged with purple.
- **Hedgehog grass**, *Echinopogon caespitosus*. This tufted perennial grass grows in woodland, on sandstone or clay. It has slender rough stems to 1m in height. Does best in a sunny position where it will thrive growing in infertile soil. Flowers in spring- summer.
- **Lavender grass**, *Eragrostis elongate*, to 60cm with pretty mauve flowers over long periods. Drought tolerant for sun or part shade. Frost hardy.
- **Weeping meadow grass**, *Microlaena stipoides*, is adaptable growing 30-50cm, and likes some shade. Can be used as a lawn substitute that is soft and lush.
- **Swamp foxtail grass**, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, an attractive clumping grass, growing to 1m. Feathery flower heads appear in summer. N.B. Only purchase this plant from a reliable nursery as it is often mistaken for the weedy exotic *Pennisetum*.
- **Coastal tussock grass**, *Poa poiformis*, a dense tussock grass to 1m high, with green to bluish-green foliage. Requires an open sunny position, but can be grown in light shade. Good for a sloping site to prevent soil erosion. Selected forms are also available for example 'Erskdale' & 'Kingsdale'.

- **Common tussock grass**, *Poa labillardieri*, tufted perennial to 1m producing grey- green to bluish-green foliage and plume like flower heads. Popular in cultivation, adapting to full sun or semi-shade. Flowers in spring- summer. Frost hardy.
- **Kangaroo grass**, *Themeda australis*. A hardy, widespread species growing to 1m tall. It grows into a tuft of bluish-green leaves with long flowering stems and distinctive clusters of spikelets. To promote vigorous new growth, cut back after flowering in spring- summer. Frost tolerant.

Sedges and Rushes

The difference is sometimes blurred, but generally grasses have a softer leaf texture and produce delicate flower heads with a spikelet as the fruit.

Sedges and rushes are usually stiffer, darker, with a fruiting head or capsule. As a general rule 'sedges have edges' referring to the sedges triangular stems, whilst 'rushes are round' with their hollow round stems. They usually grow in permanently wet locations and can be planted around ponds.

Sedges

- *Carex appressa* is a slow growing tussock to about 80cm tall with showy yellow seed heads in late spring. Grow in a sunny damp position.
- **Red fruited saw sedge**, *Gahnia sieberiana*, vigorous clumping perennial up to 3m adapting to most soils. A good accent plant that needs a damp spot in sun or shade. Flower spikes are suitable for floral arrangements. This is a host plant for the sword grass brown butterfly larvae.

Rushes

- **Knobby club rush**, *Ficinea nodosa* (syn. *Isolepis nodosa*) is hardy, fast growing and adaptable to most soils provided they are kept moist. The upright growth habit with globular seed heads provides foliage variations in the garden.
- **Tussock rush**, *Juncus usitatus* likes a shady damp position growing to 1m with fine arching stems. Useful for banks of creeks or ponds.
- **Tassel cord-rush**, *Restio tetraphyllus*, a decorative plant to 1m forms a bright green tussock of soft feathery foliage, rusty brown flowers in spring. Hardy in sun or shade.

Grasses, sedges and rushes can be very decorative when dried

A wide variety of grasses, sedges and rushes can be air-dried for floral arrangements.

- Pick just before the seed head ripens.
- They can then be spread flat on newspaper to dry or loosely tied in bunches and hung upside down in a dry dark place.
- Grasses and seed heads can be sprayed with hairspray to help keep them from 'falling'.

Other species with grass-like appearance

- Grass trees, *Xanthorrhoea spp.*
- Native Iris, *Patersonia spp.*
- Grass flag, *Libertia spp.*
- Xmas bells *Blandfordia spp.*
- Mat rush, *Lomandra spp.*
- Trigger plant, *Stylidium spp.*

References

- Field Guide to Native Plants of Sydney, Les Robinson. Published by Kangaroo Press
- Grasses of N.S.W., Wheeler Jacobs & Norton. Published by University of New Armidale
- Key to the Grasses of Sydney, Van Klaphake

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