



## “Prune like a Pro!” 2021

## ORNAMENTAL GRASS

**TITLE:** There are many species of ornamental grasses that will grow in east TN. This video will address two in particular: Prairie Dropseed Grass (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) and Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*). Both are perennial plants that will live a long time if well-tended.

**Description:** Prairie Dropseed is a native, clump forming grass. It tolerates a wide range of growing conditions but prefers well-drained soil in a sunny location.

Indian grass is the state grass of South Carolina. This native perennial grass originally grew in the natural prairies found in South Carolina four centuries ago.

**Objective(s):** Learn how and when to cut back your ornamental grasses so that they live long and healthy lives.

**WHAT:** Ornamental grasses vary in height from those that reach-up to 15 feet tall to lower growing grasses that are used as ground covers. Grass forms vary from low mounds to fountains and tall verticals.

**WHY:** Many ornamental grasses are attractive in the garden during winter, even when their primary color is brown. They provide nesting materials for the birds, protection for overwintering insects, as well as insulation for the crown of the plant. So don't be in a hurry to cut them back in the fall as they turn brown.

**WHEN:** In east TN, the general guideline is to cut back ornamental grasses just before the new season's growth starts. This is usually done in late winter or early spring. If you have a really tall grass that flops over in the fall, just trim it around the edges, and let the middle stand until late winter.

**HOW:** The shorter the grass, the closer it will be cut to the ground. The Prairie Dropseed Grass in the video was cut to about 4". The Indian Grass in the video was cut to about 8" – 10" above the ground. Each ornamental grass has a preferred height for cutting back.

There are a number of ways to cut back grasses: they can be cut back with hand pruners or hedge shears, or even electric hedge shears. It often helps to tie a string around the clump slightly above where you need to cut.

## SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS:

- Don't be in a rush to cut back ornamental grasses in the fall. They provide insulation for the crown of the plant, protection for overwintering insects, and nest materials for birds.
- Prune ornamental grasses in early spring, just before the plant starts to show new growth.
- Double-check the height to trim for each ornamental grass that you are pruning.
- For taller grasses, tie a string around the stems slightly above where you plan to cut.
- If you have only a few ornamental grasses to prune, use hand pruners or hedge shears.
  - There are specialty grass knives if you want to add to your tool collection.
- If you have a lot of ornamental grasses to prune, consider an electric hedge trimmer.
- You can spread the clippings as mulch in your ornamental beds.
- You can also compost the clippings.

## Additional Resources / References:

*Sporobolus heterolepis*, NC State Extension

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/sporobolus-heterolepis/>

*Native Grasses as Pollinator Food*, University of MN Extension, <https://grasses.cfans.umn.edu/>

*Indian Grass (Sorghastrum nutans)*, Clemson Cooperative Extension

<https://hgic.clemson.edu/indian-grass-sorghastrum-nutans/>

*Ornamental Grasses and Grass-Like Plants*. Clemson Cooperative Extension

<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/ornamental-grasses-and-grass-like-plants/>

Time to Maintain: Cutting Back Ornamental Grasses, Buncombe County Master Gardeners (NC State)

<https://www.buncombemastergardener.org/time-maintain-cutting-ornamental-grasses/>

Warm-Season Grasses and Wildlife, Penn State Extension,

<https://extension.psu.edu/warm-season-grasses-and-wildlife>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: [www.knoxcountymastergardener.org](http://www.knoxcountymastergardener.org)

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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