

Salt tolerant grasses: More to use than you think!

Folks with seaside houses have fantastic views, beaches to stroll and salt water to contend with in their yards when a hurricane moves through. Since last summer, we've all learned a lot about what will and won't make it when Mother Nature sends a storm tide. Even in the best of years, salt spray and alkaline soils are a tough combination for most plants to survive, never mind thrive, near the beach.

Among the best choices for a seaside edge are salt tolerant grasses. They help stabilize the soil, stay low so they don't obscure the view and add a natural look to the water's edge. Your choices are largely limited by how often the area floods, as well as the amount of wind and soil type. Different grasses differ in salt tolerance, with a few able to survive flooding and frequent salt spray. There are several standouts to consider where conditions are tough. If you are on the beach and want to hold your dunes with sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*), contact your extension agent for information and help on planting. Sea oats need to be placed in a series of rows and come as small plugs that need to be planted as soon as they arrive—plan this one well in advance. Sea oats spread through runners and rapidly stabilize and build dunes. They are a protected species—don't collect them or their seeds in the wild!! If you're on the bay side and your shoreline is bare, you might want to consider lining the low shore with saltmeadow cordgrass (*Spartina patens*). This grass lives with tidal inundation and is a great shoreline stabilizer where wave action is light.

Further up the shore, sand cordgrass (*Spartina bakeri*) lives in dry sandy soils, holding sand and forming large, sturdy clumps. It grows well on either the bay or beach side, but won't tolerate constant inundation. In the same zone, Muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaries*) is a beautiful and tough choice, with frothy pink or white plumes in the fall. Or consider crown grass (*Paspalum quadrifarium*). This salt tolerant beauty turns blue-green under drought stress and looks great as a mass planting. If you want a lower growing grass, consider blue dune grass (*Elymus arenarius*). This steel-blue runner can tolerate salt, sand, drought and water extremes. Although it's not a true grass, you might also consider bear grass (*Yucca filamentosa*), which will form running clumps and flower with a white stalk in the summer.

Further up the shore your range of choices expands. Love pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) Bet you haven't seen the dwarf (Pumila at 4-6 feet), white striped (Silver Comet) and gold banded (Gold Band) varieties! Maiden grass (varieties of *Miscanthus sinensis*) have some salt tolerance and love dry, windy spots.

Whatever grasses you choose, remember to water them periodically while they get established and use a small amount of slow release fertilizer to help them grow. Don't overfertilize near the water. Help keep the sea blue and your grasses green!