

# Grasslands

Ornamental grasses and a geometric path create a calm space in this London garden designed by Sophie Walker

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## IN BRIEF

**What** Small garden with formal design and ornamental grasses.

**Where** West London.

**Size** 225 square metres.

**Soil** River terrace gravel.

**Climate** Temperate with warm summers and cool, damp winters.

**Hardiness zone** USDA 8.

**Facing page** The bright, orange of *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' lights up the browns of other grasses.

**This image** A graceful fountain of *Stipa calamagrostis* provides a focal point for this corner that also includes the erect *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'.

No lawn, no bright flowers and limited maintenance was the brief from the owners of a west London house when, in 2014, they asked, Sophie Walker to redesign the garden. Their once-pretty cottage garden had become increasingly shaded by the trees they had planted 20 years earlier; the lawn had never amounted to much and, when honey fungus claimed a majestic acer and several fruit trees they decided it was time for a change.

Sophie's solution was radical. Using the clearance of the trees and the light that was let in as a starting point, she set out to create something completely different to what had gone before. "Unusually for London, the house is a 17th-century cottage and I wanted the garden to feel like a field or a meadow," she says, "very soft and engaged with the wind and the sky." Sophie decided that ornamental grasses, with their swaying forms were the answer.

Now fountains of miscanthus, clouds of deschampsia and stands of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* rustle and swish, animated by the breeze and the light. Taller grasses such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder' and *M. sinensis* 'Professor Richard Hansen' are situated further from the house, while lower-growing species such as

## GRASSES FROM THE GARDEN

**1** *Bothriochloa bladhii* Delicate looking grass, produces masses of silvery pinkish flowers to create a light and airy effect. Beautiful autumn foliage. 1.2m.

**2** *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' Distinctive vertical habit and wide, blue-grey foliage that turns yellowy orange in autumn. 1.8m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b<sup>1</sup>.

**3** *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Fleming' Feathery inflorescences that open pink and take on a silvery colour in late autumn. 2m. AGM\*. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**4** *Chasmanthium latifolium* 'Golden Spangles' A beautiful grass with arching stems that bear flattened, aubergine-tinged flowers. 1m. USDA 3a-8b.



<sup>1</sup>Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.



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**Facing page** The garden celebrates the beauty of decay with grasses that turn golden and bronze in autumn and provide movement from the constant play of the wind.

**This image** The scarlet leaves of the *Parrotia persica* are a focal point in autumn, drawing visitors through the garden.



▷ *Eragrostis spectabilis* mingle with herbs by the back door. The space now feels free and open, but with mystery. The same stands of grass that appear so ethereal in the sunlight also act as effective screens, concealing parts of the garden at first glance.

To discover them, you must follow the angular, aluminium-edged path, a stark contrast to the tickling grasses around it. “I like the idea that you go into a garden to have a journey of some sort, even if it’s to come back to where you started from,” says Sophie. “You could walk anywhere across the lawn before, but this garden helped me learn the power of the path; that the garden maker can set out that journey and give that direction.”

The owners are delighted with the result, describing it as mesmeric. The path is proving a revelation too, especially for self-confessed ‘geometry nerd’ Christopher, who walks in the garden every morning. “I like to vary my route, though,” he smiles. “I get up and think ‘Today I will go this way, and see where it leads.’” □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Sophie’s work at [sophiewalkerstudio.com](https://sophiewalkerstudio.com)

#### GRASSES FROM THE GARDEN (continued)

**5** *Stipa calamagrostis* Show-topping grass with masses of long, fluffy, silvery-white flowers that mature to a biscuity buff colour. 1m. RHS H4, USDA 4a-9b.

**6** *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Herbstzauber’ Attractive grass with fluffy white flower plumes that likes a sunny, well-drained spot. 1.2m. RHS H3, USDA 6a-9b.

**7** *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Adagio’ Elegant, low-growing miscanthus that takes on a glorious orange and yellow autumnal colour. 1.5m. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**8** *Deschampsia cespitosa* Dark-green leaves with feathery panicles of silvery-purple flowers on arching stems. 75cm. RHS H6, USDA 4a-9b.

#### MAINTAINING A GRASS GARDEN

##### Deciduous grasses need little maintenance

Prune annually every spring and divide clumps when they become too large. Pests and diseases are rarely a problem.

**To prune, cut or strim grasses to just above emerging new growth** in mid to late March.

The cut stems can either be composted or laid on the beds as a mulch; a top dressing of general fertiliser (at approximately 50g per square metre) will help feed the new growth.

**Choose grasses that have a caespitose habit** and form clumps rather than grasses that are spreading, as this will ease management.

**To divide congested clumps dig up the plant between March and May** then split using a spade – or even a knife if the roots are very tough. Pot up to grow on if small or replant the division immediately.