

Certification Training Magic From the Manual: Landscape Grasses

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The MNLA Certification program has been working hard at trying to create more training and preparation for people looking to become certified. One of these ways of helping you to prepare in taking the exam this January is to break apart a portion of the manual each month to test your skill knowledge and give you a better feel of what would be on the exam.

Following are excerpts from the chapter on Landscape Grasses and then a sample of the type of questions you might find on the MNLA Certification Exam.

Landscape Grasses

Many characteristics make grasses desirable for landscape plantings. Grasses have more than one season of interest: the flowers of summer turn into interesting seed heads that are beautiful through fall and into winter, the foliage is attractive whether it is green, yellow, blue, red or variegated, and the movement of the foliage in the wind is a sight to behold. Culturally, many grasses are easy to grow and maintain, as they have few insect or disease problems and they have low nutrient requirements.

In general, landscape grasses are grasses and grass-like plants that are used primarily for aesthetic and site stabilization purposes. They are a large and complex group of plants with a wide range of habitat, culture and use.

Growth of Grasses

Landscape grasses grow as perennials or annuals. Annual grasses live a complete life cycle in one year or one season. Many perennial grasses that are not hardy in Minnesota are being used as annuals in the bedding plant industry. Although they do not complete their life cycle in one year, they will freeze and die with fall frosts, effectively making them annual. Some examples of commonly used annual grasses in Minnesota include Pennisetum setaceum ‘Rubrum’ (Purple Fountain Grass).

Perennial grasses live and grow for more than two seasons. Many perennials are long-lived, persisting for decades. They can be herbaceous, woody or semi-woody. Many grasses are perennial in one climate and annual in others.

Seasons of Growth – Grasses are classified as either warm-season or cool-season species, depending on when they are in an active growth phase. Warm-Season grasses grow when temperatures begin to warm in spring. They flower and set seed in summer and fall, and go dormant with the onset of winter. Cool-season grasses begin growth in early spring. They flower from early spring into early summer, and go dormant or are slow growing in summer. They resume active growth with cooler fall temperatures.

Growth Habit – Two types of growth habits characterize grasses. “Running grasses” spread by creeping stems or rhizomes, forming dense mats. Many running grasses can be very invasive. “clumping grasses” grow in tufts, slowly increasing in size.

Grass Form – Grasses also exist in many shapes and sizes. There are six primary categories used to define the shapes of grasses. These categories describe the form of the foliage, not the flowering stems or seed heads.

1. Tufted: Spiky foliage that can be fine textured with upright leaves that arise from a basal clump.
2. Mounded: Mounding Foliage that weeps wherein the top growth covers the lower leaves.
3. Upright: Erect foliage that grows vertically.
4. Upright Divergent: Foliage grows up and out in an erect or stiff manner.
5. Upright Arching: Foliage grows upright and then becomes fountain like at the top.
6. Arching: Foliage arches up and out, in somewhat equal proportion.

Planting Landscape Grasses

When to Plant – Most grasses are best planted in early spring, so that they establish a root system before the heat of summer. Fall planting can be successful if container plants are used, but winter protection may be necessary in some cases.

Soil – Most grasses can grow in most soil types, but grow best in a soil that is rich in organic matter and is well drained. Many grasses will not grow well with high fertility as too much nitrogen results in tall, floppy plants, which are not desirable in the landscape.

Planting – When planting grasses, avoid planting too deeply or too shallow. Observe the crown line and place it at the soil line. Many grasses will not tolerate being planted too deeply. Water newly planted grasses immediately, and monitor water needs throughout the growing season.

Propagation and Transplanting Landscape Grasses

Grasses are propagated mainly by two methods: seed and division. Named cultivars are propagated by division to ensure uniformity. Seed-grown varieties may show some natural variation, but variation can have a positive effect, depending on the end use.

Grasses can be divided, and should be divided for many reasons. Division can be used to propagate more plants, to renew existing overgrown clumps, or to relocate improperly placed plants. Warm-season grasses are best divided in early spring, and cool-season grasses can be divided in fall and early spring. It is best to divide grasses just when the plant is starting to actively grow. When dividing grasses, cut back the foliage by one fourth to one on third to help reduce loss of moisture through transpiration.

Study Questions:

1. T F Warm-season grasses should be divided in the fall.
2. T F Pennisetum setaceum ‘Rubrum’ would be considered an annual grass.
3. Cool-season grasses begin their growth cycle:
 - A. Early Fall Season
 - B. Early Spring Season
 - C. Late Spring Season
 - D. Mid Summer Season
 - E. Late Fall Season
4. Festuca (Blue Fescue) would fit best under which of the following grass forms:
 - A. Mounded
 - B. Upright
 - C. Arching
 - D. Upright Divergent
 - E. Tufted

Answers: 1-F, 2-T., 3-B, 4-E

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