

Grasses – More Than Lawns

It may be a challenge to believe that more than 250 pages can be written using just four fields as subject matter. “Four Fields” is the name of the book by Tim Dee that describes the fen field at the bottom of his Cambridgeshire garden, a Zambian field, a meadow near Chernobyl, and a prairie field in Little Bighorn, Montana. This lyrical writing about nature is not a page-turner but a chance to hold an internal conversation about fields, and history, and grass.

The section about our prairie was revelatory, to hear again that the battle of Little Bighorn was about grass, and the end of the unfenced prairies. “Turn over the grasses and topsoil of the prairie and it is no longer prairie.” I had not known there was more than 10 feet of topsoil beneath the surface of the prairie nor that most of any grass is underground where roots can travel for miles to survive drought and fire.

At one time the dominant grass was big bluestem, boasting 25 miles of roots. Less than 5% of the tallgrass type is still there and of the remaining shortgrass prairie a great example of it may be seen at the Little Bighorn Battlefield. Those 700 acres have never been ploughed and in places where it is ungrazed there may be 250 plant species at one site, an incredible ecosystem.

In our Eastern landscape our fields are less grass and more corn and soybeans but we still struggle to grow grasses that must be watered, fertilized, and endlessly mowed. Surprisingly, in many garden catalogs there is an attempt to persuade us to import a piece of prairie. Not just the wild prairie flowers such as the cardinal flower, Joe Pye weed, blue flags, sneezeweed, turtleheads, but also the grasses. For decades, swathes of prairie grasses have been used by designers in business parks and other large landscapes. However they are increasingly used to accompany native plantings that are more relaxed in their total effect. Those most popular are usually smaller versions of the six or seven foot species.

On one of our recent ‘spring’ days I cut back the two-year old ‘Little Bluestem’ on a bank where the first year it was a frail wisp. Now about three feet tall it is blue in summer and coppery pink in winter with fluffy white seedheads. Along with pink muhly grass, these stems sway and sparkle with dew or frost early and late on the days when little else is in flower.

Another species that is sufficiently well behaved for use in a small garden is *Miscanthus sinensis*, maiden grass or eulalia. ‘Morning Light’ is a pet and ‘Gold Bar’ has horizontal rather than vertical color contrasts. Pennisetums are popular but I have found they tend to spread without invitation. For masses of red and gold color, grasses are as effective as flowers. Among the red ones are *Panicum* ‘Cheyenne Sky’ and *Hakonechloa* ‘Naomi’. For gold, *Hakonechloa* ‘All Gold’ is useful and Northern Sea Oats (*Chasmanthum*) ‘River Mist’ a brilliant white.

Not only are grasses being introduced for their value as specimens among other plants, many are offered as lawns or as substitutes for lawns. Available from Prairie Moon nursery (www.prairiemoon.com) is Buffalo Grass a broader-leafed lawn alternative that is durable under heavy traffic. It actually looks like conventional grass and grows very slowly to about five inches, needs little mowing and survives on less than an inch of water a week.

It should be planted late spring in full sun and spreads by rhizomes. The same catalog features “Eco-Grass” a blend of cultivar fine fescues. This lawn alternative may be just the ticket for areas surrounding vegetable gardens or home orchards as it is pretty and low maintenance. If you live in a neighborhood where the sound of power mowers is the Saturday/Sunday Symphony, Eco-Grass may not be welcome.

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For those gardeners needing less intensive work, shrubs and mulch are the way to shrink the lawn and its demands. A warning: check the ultimate size of shrubs. You don't want to spend your declining years buried in a forest.