

## **Take Care of the Home ground (or what will the neighbors think?)**

It is a given that people desire the area surrounding their homes to be attractive. The problem arises when we define 'attractive' in our own manner. In the 1920s the group that developed a Baltimore neighborhood rented the land to the homeowner for 100 years so could require compliance. That protocol not only defined the look of the homes but specified to whom they could be sold. That later directive is now illegal but I wonder if the trim must still be deepest green and the front garden limited to grass and shrubs?

Most neighborhoods have given up trying to create specific 'thou shalt not's' after the obvious, 'no vehicles up on blocks' and 'no deteriorating washing machines on the front porch.' There is no question that a store or homeowner allowing decrepitude and disorder to mar the neighborhood is a poor citizen but constructing laws attempting to make people virtuous are a waste of time. Decay is contagious so a degree of authority is essential.

Gardeners planting meadows in their front yards have been told to mow and in some places clotheslines are taboo. In that Baltimore neighborhood clothes could be dried behind latticework fences, but that may have been annulled with the prevalence of dryers; I wonder?

Places in arid areas that once expected homes to be surrounded by lush green have finally realized the futility of that nonsense and are landscaping with desert plants, gravel and other design elements that acknowledge that one design does not suit all climates. Slowly water is being recognized as being too essential to waste on plants not raised as food. Today you rarely see automatic sprinklers aimlessly watering driveways, a blessing.

Native plants have regained popularity as gardeners appreciate the ability of these tough survivors to save money, time, and energy. Wishing to encourage beneficial insects, pollinators, birds and butterflies, gardeners are planting serviceberry (*Amelanchier*), wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), blueberries (*Vaccinium*), beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), youpon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), milkweeds (*Asclepias syriaca*), asters, sunflowers (*Helianthus*) and switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*).

Grasses may be an acquired taste. A dear friend is convinced the only good grass is a mowed grass but bless her heart, her lawn is not ad copy perfect. She mows any herbaceous material that occupies that space designated as 'lawn'. It is true that great sweeps of ornamental grasses look best in business parks but there are delightful small versions in many colors. Although penisetums have charming long-lasting seedheads resembling bottlebrushes, they can be invasive. Miscanthus, which has looser plumes, stays where you put it. *M. sinensis pururascens* begins green but has reddish purple hues that last until time to cut it back in spring. *Helictotrichon sempervirens* is smaller, to 18" and stays fairly blue. Also blue are the *Schizachyrium*, a native prairie grass that is comfortable in hot dry spots. For reds there are *Panicum 'Shenandoah'* and a *Hakonechloa macra 'Nicholas'*.

*Panicum* or switch grass is a fine garden plant, and if you have space, 'Cloud Nine' is tall and blue. *Panicums* are a treat for the birds as well, the taller ones providing cover as well as food. They are also tolerant of less than ideal conditions (the definition of what most of us have) and are ignored by critters.

For a plant that is not a grass, there is *Carex* that looks like a grass. It is well behaved and it makes a good ground cover and doesn't get as tatty as liriopse after a long winter. Usually evergreen, *Carex* comes in golden and bluish tones as well as green. The more interesting ones have a Japanese passport but *C. cherokeensis*, the Cherokee Sedge is both native and

endangered. Another, *C. texensis*, Texas sage, is so fine textured it can be used as a lawn in partial sun or shade. It is non-fussy and tolerant of clay soil. Both of these natives are available from Niche Gardens ([www.nichegardens.com](http://www.nichegardens.com)).

18 Apr 13