

There is Grass – and then there are GRASSES!

The very fashionable grasses are not designed as carpet but as a substitute for shrubs or large perennials. You won't be walking on them, but you may be tempted to dance with them. Great stands, from five to ten feet have been a presence on large campuses or estates always. What is new is our appreciation for their smaller editions used in private gardens of all sizes, for landscaping commercial establishments with green enhancements, and even in highway median plantings.

In choosing an ornamental grass for the home garden consider size, color, the season of inflorescence, whether it is annual or perennial, evergreen or deciduous. Among other particulars, some ornamental grasses are not grasses. They can be a species of another genus.

Sedges (*Carex*) is a vast genus with 1500 or more species, most of which have grass-like foliage and small grass-like flowers. Two others, mondo grass (*Ophiopogon*) and blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium*) behave in the garden as a decorative grass without being a grass and the familiar liriopel belongs to the lily family and is sometimes called lilyturf.

Carex varies in its cultural requirements: some are happy in dry soil, others need moist and fertile soil. All of them do well in sun or partial shade. Several species have golden foliage and some sport reddish brown leaves. The names of some newer varieties give a clue to their appearance: 'Evergold', 'Silver Sceptre', 'Ice Dance', 'Gold Fountains', 'Capuccino'. The heights, too, may vary, from one to three feet.

Less towering than other feather reed grass is *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Forster' with pink-bronze inflorescences that fade to buff. The clump is about two feet tall but the flower stems sway as tall as six feet. C.a. 'Overdam' has leaves with pale yellow margins and stripes that fade to pink flushed white with age.

Miscanthus is surely one of the most popular grasses, surviving in poor soil and hot sun. My favorite is M. 'Morning Light' a four foot but delicate plant with a fine light line on the foliage. *Miscanthus sinensis* (*Eulalia* grass) is deciduous, clump-forming perennial with arching blue/green leaves. 'Cabaret' has broad mid-green leaves with conspicuous white stripes. It can get very tall, a hedge or screening selection. M.s. 'Zebrinus' is broadly arching with creamy white or pale yellow horizontal bands on the leaves and grows to about four feet. My zebra grass has lost its stripes which is a shame. I wonder if a new cultivar M.s. 'Gold Bar' which grows slowly to five feet in eight years might stay barred?

Other grasses for full sun include the Pennisetums with sizes for every occasion. These grasses add structure to the winter garden as well as food for birds. Some varieties will seed themselves en masse so you must deprive the birds if you don't want to be digging them out of the garage apron. The seed heads are lovely if promiscuous. Another group of graceful grasses is the native switchgrass, *Panicum*.. 'Shenandoah' is a bright burgundy and 'Heavy Metal' is steely blue. Also blue are the native bluestems, *Schizachyrium scoparium*. They are light in effect and small enough to join the perennial bed.

Impressed by the pictures in the AHS A-Z encyclopedia of *Hakonechloa macrochaeta* 'Aureola', the small golden variegated Hakone grass, I planted a 2-inch pot of it where it could be easily watered and shaded from hot afternoon sun. It died. My children suggest that gardeners of a certain age buy larger specimens of these choice things. I have ordered a replacement – quart size.

The Hakone grass is a genus of one species and *H. macrochaeta* is a calming green. There are newer cultivars in this year's catalogs. One, H.m. 'Beni Kaze', has green leaves in summer that turn a brilliant red in fall. 'All-Gold' has chartreuse leaves and rather than arching leaves, the 'All-Gold' leaves are erect and the plant will slowly spread to become a ground cover. A Hakone grass that tolerates more sun is the white striped variety, 'Albo Striata'.

There are always exceptions, but generally these deer proof grasses need little care and reward you with movement that enhances any place they grow. If they are mulched they won't need fertilizer nor additional water once established.

If you own a pot with an unusual style or eye-catching color or decoration, a selection of grasses would be the perfect complement. Coupled perhaps with a sedum or euphorbia you would have a symphony of greens that would not compete for attention but instead, would gather more.