

My Love Affair with Ornamental Grasses



A year ago I had never given ornamental grasses a second thought. My opinion was, why would anyone actually want to plant grass (you just have to cut it!), and I'm always working toward my goal to get rid of all of my lawn grass and put in more flowerbeds. I figured less time spent mowing was more time to tend to my flowers, and I would much rather work in my flowerbeds than mow lawn.

Then I picked up a couple small clumps of Zebra grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus') at the WHPS Plant Exchange at Stephanie O'Neal's garden in September 2004. I had seen this 6' tall arching grass in some of the tour gardens last summer and liked the striking horizontally banded leaves. I stuck the clumps in a new bed near the road open to the west and north where they would catch the breeze. I'd just had two medium size silver maple trees removed from that area so the new grasses were in full sun. Then one day on my way home from work I stopped at Schönheit Gardens and bought a gallon pot of the 4-6' tall Porcupine grass (*M. sinensis* 'Strictus') with similarly banded leaves but with a more upright habit than the Zebra grass. I also picked up two of the Blue Switch Grass (*Panicum* 'Dallas Blues') with wide steely blue leaves and purplish seed heads to 6-8' and two of the Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) which forms a dense mound of blue gray foliage 24-30 inches tall. Both of these blue foliage grasses contrasted beautifully with the green and white striped *Miscanthus*. I was falling in love with ornamental grasses!

My love affair with grasses continued this spring when I started working as the Nursery Manager at Schönheit Gardens. I had to have some of the *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Avalanche', a Feather Reed Grass similar to Karl Foerster, but with variegated foliage consisting of deep green leaves with a wide white stripe down the center. Its feathery gold 4' tall plumes appear in early summer and last for the whole season – even into the winter months. I added two of them to the same flowerbed near the road where they complement the greens and blues of the other grasses there. I also put in two of the annual 3-4' tall Purple Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum'). Their arching wine-purple foliage is topped with fuzzy burgundy plumes that sway gracefully in the breeze. I also couldn't live without two of the 5-6' Maiden Grass *M. sinensis* 'Gracillimus', with their beautiful fine-textured silvery green leaves and arching habit. Even though this grass and the shorter 4-5' *M. sinensis* 'Morning Light' rarely bloom in our climate, they both remain sturdy through the winter and add an interesting architectural element to the garden any time of year. I planted them near a *C. acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', which grows to 5-6' tall and has erect wheat-like seed heads that last all season long. Then I just had to have some of the 8-10" rounded mounds of Blue Fescue (*Festuca glauca* 'Elijah Blue'). I love how their soft powdery blue foliage stands out in the garden and holds up all year.

To really add pizzazz to the bed by the road I planted up two huge pots with annual *Rudbeckia* 'Indian Summer', *Sedum repestre* 'Angelina', wave petunias, sweet potato vine ('Blackie' and 'Marguerite') and *Millet* 'Purple Majesty', which can grow up to 5' tall with dense dramatic plumes and dark burgundy foliage. In late summer or early fall I plan to switch out the annual flowers in the pots for some fall mums and kales to carry the interest through the fall season. Later on, after the mums are done, I'll start the holiday decorating by adding some evergreen boughs and red berries, and some curly willow or red-twigged dogwood to take the pots through the winter. For additional winter interest in the garden, I'll leave the perennial grasses up until spring before I cut them back. I can't wait to see them waving in the wind through the snowdrifts.

Next year, I want to try some of the native grasses such as Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). Both of these sun-loving grasses are drought tolerant and grow to 2-4' tall. Or maybe I'll get the giant Ravenna Grass (*Erianthus ravennae*) with flower stalks that can reach 12' tall!! The love affair continues...

—Jane Gahlman

Jane Gahlman is the Nursery Manager at Schönheit Gardens, a new perennial nursery at 3577 Bailey Road, Sun Prairie (just minutes from Madison at the intersection of Hwy T and Bailey Road). 2005 Hours: Tues-Sat 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Sun 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., closed Mondays. Fall mums and kales arriving by September 1. Stop out soon to receive up to 30% off a wide selection of ornamental grasses, perennials, trees and shrubs. Phone: 608-441-9832.