

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 10-22-03) , ©2005

As the days become more chilly, dreary and damp, try planting some ornamental grasses to lighten up the darkness. A quote by “anonymous” says, “Sedges have edges and rushes are round, grasses are hollow and run all around.” This saying hints at the family characteristics of these utilitarian and interesting plants.

Sue Thompson of Harstine Heirloom Gardens in Mason County spoke at the WSU Master Gardener Conference in Port Townsend this past weekend. She offered tips and techniques to have maximum success using ornamental grasses to complement existing plantings, in containers, under trees, as landscaping over a raised mound septic system or as hedges and fencing in place of woody plants.

Thompson lists these desirable traits of grasses: very few insect or disease problems; low nutrient requirements; drought tolerant (once established); low maintenance; more than one season of interest; fast growing; varied textures; hardy, tough and durable; foliage colors; form; animation; environmentally friendly; seashore tolerant and decorative in flower arrangements. Thompson incorporates these grasses attributes into her renowned septic system landscape designs in Mason County.

Grasses can be annual, biennial, perennial and evergreen. Perennials and evergreens take about two to three years to become established so require a little TLC for their first two years. They'll need water once every two weeks the first year and in very hot dry summers they'll need to be monitored. If a grass is overwatered it will flop over or die. The centers of perennial grasses die out every three or four years and plants require dividing. Compost the dead center and plant the new divisions or share with friends.

You'll want to know if the grass you purchase is clump-forming, creeping or running. Find out if it's a cool or warm season grass, and whether it's annual or perennial. Many grasses triple in growth their first year. Take this into consideration. Thompson says, “Do not use mushroom compost when planting or tending grasses. Mulch with a thin layer of compost only once a year. And, never use fertilizer on ornamental grasses.”

When selecting ornamental grasses ask the nursery professional if it's a grass that needs cutting back. Find out what time of year to cut back. Wear gardening gloves and comb out Carex; the dead strands will pull out as you groom the plant. Seed heads strands can be bundled together and looped into a wreath. Some gardeners like to occasionally trim the ends of Carex and other evergreens (or everbrowns) nipping off dried out tips. Blue Oat Grass likes raking. Usually a grass that dies back and fades out to wheat, beige or white, will require cutting back to the ground in mid February to early March. When in doubt consult a book on grasses or ask nursery professionals. If you make a mistake and kill your specimen, don't despair, just make compost. It will provide an excuse to try out a new or different plant in that empty space.

Visit your favorite local library or bookstore and find “Grasses, Versatile Partners for Uncommon Garden Design” written by Nancy J. Ondra with incredible photographs by Saxon Holt. Try to find “Ornamental Grasses” the Brooklyn Botanic Garden Record Handbook #117 (ISBN 0945352484). “Sunset Western Garden Book” has excellent details on each type of grass.

Nothing equals seeing the grasses in person though. Sadly, Thompson’s nursery is closed for the winter, opening again in April. She can be contacted at Harstine Heirloom Gardens, 1190 E Sunset Hill Road, Shelton, WA 98584, phone 360-427-2440, Fax 360-427-7584 or email [HIgardens@aol.com](mailto:HIgardens@aol.com). Locally Savage Plants 6810 NE State Hwy 104 in Kingston, 360-297-8711 (open all year) and Sundquist’s Nursery on Sawdust Hill Road off of Hwy 104, 360-779-6343 (by appointment) also have a wide selection of ornamental grasses.

A few of my favorites from Thompson’s slide presentation were: Calamagrostis brachytricha (fall blooming reed grass); Stipa gigantea ‘Giant Feather Grass,’ Miscanthus ‘Variegatus,’ Pennisetum orientale (has pink seed heads), Miscanthus purpurascence ‘Flame Grass’ and Carex morrowii aureovariegata ‘Evergold.’ For a list of grasses by categories send a self-addressed, stamped envelope marked “grasses list” to WSU Extension, P Tillery, 614 Division Street MS-16, Port Orchard WA 98366-4676.

There’s only one caution in collecting and planting ornamental grasses. Make sure the source you use is reputable and confirm that the plant is non-invasive. Some ornamental grasses need to be contained and should only be planted in containers. (Think bamboos.) If it’s a suspect grass you just “have to have now” then bring it home and grow it in a container for a year or two until you’re sure how it will behave.

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