

## THEY'RE OUT OF FASHION NOW

*John Summerfield*

As the owners of Westshores Nurseries, specialising in ornamental grasses, the title of this piece is frequently put to us as a rhetorical question: 'aren't grasses out of fashion now?' or, 'don't you think ornamental grasses are a bit passé?' Any attempts to refute these remarks are met with unconvinced sympathetic smiles or shakes of the head. It is much easier to deal with, or accept, 'I don't like grasses' or 'they do nothing for me'. We were always amused by farmers who passed our award-winning displays at the Driffield Show muttering 'we spray these off!' A classic was from a lady of mature years who told my wife, Gail, that she was 'too old' to have grasses.

I would like to challenge those gardeners who will not entertain any tall grasses in their gardens. There are several plant genera which attract strong views - roses, chrysanthemums and dahlias, for example - but all of these plants can contribute towards the general design of the garden, and most gardeners have at least one representative in their planting palette. To rule out a whole family, which clearly contributes to the design in ways that other herbaceous perennials can't, is verging on prejudice.

Gail claims I am 'heightist': I love tall grasses, particularly miscanthus and molinia. I struggle a little with customers who, when asked what height they are looking for, gesture somewhere between knee and thigh. Even modest gardens can take a bit of height and I work quite hard to get them to consider one or two 5-6 ft (1.6 - 1.8m) grasses as statements.

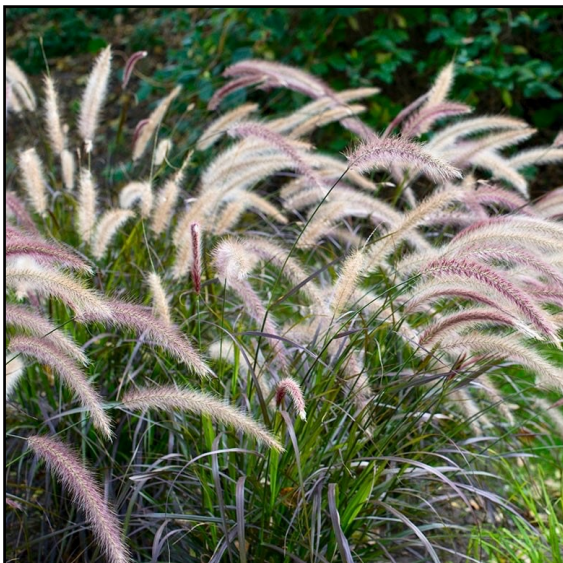


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*Miscanthus sinensis 'China'*

We stopped exhibiting at shows at the end of 2013 because of the physical demands of lugging large numbers of plants from van to stand, and Gail thought our point had been made by a succession of Gold and Premier Gold awards. Nevertheless, our sales have not declined; in fact, they are well up on previous years.

Many mainstream garden centres are reluctant to give grasses shelf space now, because they do not merchandise well. The stunning *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', has all but disappeared from garden centres because it is too slow to produce and bulk up.



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*Pennisetum setaceum 'Rubrum'*

There are over 10,000 species of grasses from a wide range of habitats worldwide, including semi-tropical. Many gardeners have been disappointed with *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum', the dramatic purple grass with long, fluffy inflorescences. Unscrupulous traders failed to tell them that it requires a minimum temperature of 7°C and needs winter protection with plenty of light. A few years back I experimented with taking internodal cuttings of this grass; it took me twelve months from taking cuttings to producing saleable plants the following June. The new baby plants now go through the winter in my office window; the only time the room is tidied up!

Unfortunately this poor experience has led to caution with this genus, but there is a scale of hardiness with pennisetums. The tall (1.6m) *Pennisetum macrourum* with long fluffy 'pencils' will take quite low temperatures. *P. alopecuroides* cultivars are hardy, but they are late-flowering and need a warm spell in early September to get them to look their best. *Pennisetum orientale* cultivars survive and flourish in the beds at Harlow Carr, but I suspect they go into the ground as large well established specimens. My advice to everyone is to check the hardiness of any pennisetum before buying.

Some customers have concerns about grasses running and seeding around. As far as the former is concerned, the classic culprits are gardeners' garters (*Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* cultivars) and steel blue *Elymus magellanicus*. Both are very attractive and are best grown in pots; we have seen *Phalaris arundinacea* used to great effect in municipal gardens in France as a companion to flowering bedding plants, but obviously they were lifted in autumn. The best-known self-seeders are pony tails (*Stipa tenuissima*) and Bowles' golden grass (*Milium effusum* 'Aureum'). The latter favours partial shade, to avoid scorching. *Anemanthele lessoniana* (formerly *Stipa arundinacea*) also has a tendency to seed around. They are well worth having in the garden.

At this point I should mention bamboos. *Pleioblastus* species are thugs and must be grown in pots; *Fargesia* species are the best bet for clumping and staying put. A few years ago we discovered *Fargesia nitida* 'Jiuzhaigou', which has small, slender leaves and reddish stems, and grows no more than 1.6 metres. In winter it is



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*Fargesia nitida* 'Jiuzhaigou'

important to remember to check that bamboos in pots are getting enough water. Their roots take up silica and fill the pots, and the absence of growing media means water is not retained. A sign they are in trouble is greying of the leaves and then leaf curl.

Almost all our stock is propagated by us but there is demand for certain grasses, which we cannot meet. In the middle of March we drive to Diss, in Norfolk, to collect an order placed the previous September. On our last visit to the wholesale Howard Nurseries, I took a photograph of several thousand newly-potted *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars on the standing out area. Somebody must be buying them. Who says they have gone out of fashion?