

## A Green Carpet In The Biosphere

by Richard Moyroud

If one looks at any area of land not covered by permanent ice, species of grasses are likely to be present. Some species, with the help of human activity, have spread far beyond their native ranges to become staple food crops, ornamentals, or — the incarnation of the gardener's nemesis — a *weed!* Because grass seed is small and often has barbs, unintentional introduction has been the rule while animals have roamed the earth. We humans have accelerated the process with ships and airplanes.

More than half of the world's population is fed by one small semi-aquatic grass cultivated since antiquity — rice (*Oryza sativa*). Our own Western economy is heavily dependent on a handful of grass species for direct or indirect consumption. These include wheat (*Triticum* spp.), corn (*Zea mays*), and oats (*Avena sativa*).

Among ornamentals, many of the typical lawn grasses in temperate North America were introduced from Eurasia. Most surprising of these is "Kentucky" bluegrass. Our commonly used St. Augustine grass (*Stenotaphrum secundatum*) has an obscure history, and is doubtfully native.

As might be expected, many introduced grasses have become pest plants. Pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) is a designated pest plant in southern California. A number of introduced forage grasses have become serious

pests in Florida. Johnson grass (*Sorghum halepense*) is one such pest plant introduced from Africa. Some species are pests in garden situations, but may prevent erosion in other places; the aggressive torpedograss (*Panicum repens*) is one such plant.

Some of our native species have become popular ornamentals in their own right. Foremost of these is *Tripsacum dactyloides*, commonly called gama grass and found throughout eastern North America. Enterprising Florida nurseries have capitalized on the intriguing, but fabricated, common name, Fakahatchee grass. The related *Tripsacum floridanum* is a Florida endemic, and resembles a miniature version of *T. dactyloides*.

Other native species being prop-

agated are:

Purple-flowered muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*), a fine-leaved clump grass with feathery purple flower spikes throughout the fall;

Lopsided Indian grass (*Sorghastrum secundum*);

Wild bamboo (*Lasiacis divaricata*);

Cordgrass (*Spartina* species);

and even wiregrass (*Aristida* spp.).

As more species become recognized and used in new plantings, our landscapes will reflect more of Florida's own carpet of green, from wiregrass under pine canopies to wet prairies inland and sea oats on coastal dunes. Plant some grasses today and add to the real wall-to-wall outdoor carpet.

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