

Ornamental Bunchgrasses

by Rufino Osorio

In gardening circles, an appreciation of grasses has become a distinguishing characteristic of the sophisticated gardener. Grasses often have subtle charms not readily appreciated by novice gardeners — especially those enamored of raucously colored flowers the size of dinner plates.

In spite of lacking gaudy flowers, many grasses are spectacularly ornamental for a variety of reasons. Some are of such immense proportions that they have a noble, almost architectural or sculptural quality. Many are of interest because of their growth form and beautiful foliage, making them useful for adding textural variety in the garden. Grasses are also noteworthy for their ornamental flower and seed spikes, as these are often adorned by attractive awns or silky hairs. Lastly, but certainly not the least of their special qualities, most grasses are both easily propagated and effortlessly cultivated.

Horticulturally, perennial grasses are divided into two principal groups: sodgrasses and bunchgrasses. The former

produce elongated rhizomes and, when competing plants are eliminated, will form a groundcover. Obviously, all cultivated lawn grasses are sodgrasses. In contrast, bunchgrasses have such short rhizomes that new growth is formed in a close circle around the perimeter of the plant. Instead of forming a sod, the bunchgrasses tend to produce rounded clumps of varying dimensions. Bunchgrasses may be used in ways unthinkable for a sodgrass, such as in flower beds,

as accent plants, or in formal garden schemes.

Some of the most common, readily grown, ornamental native bunchgrasses may seem far from

“... most grasses are both easily propagated and effortlessly cultivated.”

appealing when growing in the wild.

Yet, in cultivation, they will form dense, many-stemmed clumps of great beauty. Native bunchgrasses require some care in order to maintain their most attractive appearance. Since their foliage is one of their main assets, these grasses should be cut back once a year to remove



Andropogon virginicus

Photo by JoJo Lindquist

old, worn-out foliage. I cut them back to within an inch or two of the ground. This may sound severe, but bear in mind that all of these grasses are fire adapted and so are actually rejuvenated by being cut to the ground periodically. This cutting back is best performed in late winter, just before the plants begin their spring growth. Some grasses, especially bluestems, can assume a most ungainly and coarse aspect when going to seed. These should have the old flower stems cut back just before they go to seed.

This brief summary of Florida bunchgrasses is by no means an exhaustive listing, but serves as a starting point for the gardener who wishes to explore the amazing horticultural potential of our native grasses. Additionally, it provides the wildflower enthusiast with native alternatives to the foreign grasses which, thus far, have nearly completely dominated the grass-growing craze currently sweeping the United States.

All of the grasses described require full sun for the development of compact, sturdy,

attractive growth. Some of these grasses naturally occur in wet areas, others in dry, sandy habitats. Fortunately, most grasses are flexible and will tolerate quite a variety of soils with different moisture regimes. As for propagation, I find that seed is the easiest method.

Although nurseries produce thousands of grass plants from divisions, I have not been able master the technique. In my experience, native grasses greatly resent root disturbance and divisions, under my conditions at least, and slowly languish if kept on the dry side and become root rotted if kept too wet. Because of this, I generally stick to seeds as the preferred method of propagating grasses. Nearly all of the grasses in this article have seeds

which germinate readily, some in as little as two days.

Andropogon gerardii, big bluestem, lives up to its name and is a robust plant which, in good soil with adequate moisture, easily reaches six feet in height. Plants are

often *glaucous*, a technical term which refers to foliage with a silvery blue, often waxy, coating. Flower spikes are commonly borne in groups of three and fancifully resemble a bird's foot. Big bluestem is a large, statuesque grass that makes an excellent specimen plant. The primary habitat of this species is the Mississippi Valley tallgrass prairie, however, it extends south into the northern portion of peninsular Florida.

Andropogon ternarius, split-beard-bluestem, forms a loose clump and, vegetatively, is not nearly as attractive as some of the more densely growing bluestems. In spite of this, it is well worth growing. In full bloom, the splitbeard-bluesetem produces



Sorghastrum secundum, Lopsided Indian grass

Photo by JoJo Lindquist

masses of paired spikes dramatically borne on six foot high stems. The spikes are covered with white, silky hairs, adding to their interest.

"Grasses dance in the breeze and are silent in the storm."

– Arab proverb

Andropogon virginicus, broom-sedge, is a common native bunchgrass of open areas. The typical form is rather nondescript, but there is an extremely attractive variety with highly ornamental foliage: *A. virginicus* var. *glaucus*. All parts of this variety are covered with a dense, intensely silvery white, waxing coating. The coating is nearly as white as chalk and so thick that it may be scraped off, leaving a chalky residue on one's

fingernails — hence the common name of chalky-bluestem. In the wild, it is often found in highly acidic, very poor sandy soils in full sun. Under such conditions, the plants can scarcely be expected to achieve their full ornamental potential.

However, chalky-bluestem is quite striking in cultivation where it forms large rounded clumps of intensely silvery white foliage. Unfortunately, the plant

deteriorates badly as it goes to flower and should be cut to the ground annually.

Ctenium aromaticum, toothache grass, is a low, densely clumping grass with dark green or bluish green foliage. Commonly found in moist or even wet areas, it has two principal points of interest. The first is its flower spikes, which form spirals at maturity, like little pigs' tails. The second is an aromatic element that produces a novocaine-like

numbness in the mouth when the leaves are chewed, thus accounting for the common name of toothache-grass.

Yellow Indian grass and lopsided Indian grass, *Sorghastrum nutans* and *Sorghastrum secundum*,

respectively, are two additional noteworthy bunchgrasses of singular beauty. Both plants form large, rather loose clumps of little distinction. However, toward the end of summer and into autumn, both Indian grasses produce dramatically tall spikes of numerous, extremely attractive flowers. The exterior of the bracts, which enclose the true flowers, are clothed in silky soft, golden brown hairs and, as a delightful contrast, one of the bracts of each flower bears a long, darker brown

awn. The large yellow anthers provide a finishing touch. The resulting effect is a symphony of brass, mahogany, and gold. Indian grasses are at their best when their flower spikes are backlit by the sun.

Stipa *avenacioides*, Florida needlegrass, is a smaller bunchgrass of open sandy sites. The inflorescence consists of a graceful, loosely flowered panicle made conspicuous by the extremely long awn borne by each floret. Because of its sandy habitat, I assumed that needlegrass would be hard to grow. However, in four-inch pots of well-drained houseplant mix, plants went from seed to full flower in just a few months. ☀