

# Grasses in the garden - more wow, less work? *Neil Lucas*

**F**or many gardeners a slight air of mystery can surround the use of grasses in gardens, but in fact they are deceptively easy to use and are really no different from most perennial plants. Certainly there are grasses which are 'spreaders', but those mostly offered by specialist nurseries and good garden centres are clump forming plants that have excellent garden manners. Strongly architectural, they work well en masse but are just as happy in mixed plantings and need little in the way of aftercare once established. More 'wow' with less work is a practical maxim for gardening with grasses.

As most of the 'wow-factor' deciduous grasses come into their own from high summer onwards, they are uniquely placed to carry the scene right though what can otherwise be a rather barren period in gardens. My own garden at Knoll has a peak of interest from high summer right through until late autumn, and it still looks good right up to Christmas and deep into winter.



*Illustration/Tom Boulton*

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All of the main groups of deciduous grasses can provide showstopping impact such as miscanthus, pennisetum, panicum, calamagrostis and molinia.

*Miscanthus* 'Ferner Osten' at about 2 metres has fast growing mounds of gently cascading foliage during the earlier part of the season, followed by masses of dark red flowers that gradually fade to beige; all the while with amazing textural qualities that last far longer than the initial flush of fresh colour. It is just one of many good garden cultivars that reach a peak of performance with the onset of autumn. *Miscanthus* 'Flamingo' is a similar height and every bit as good and effective in the garden, but with deep bright pink pendulous flowers, while the newly released *Miscanthus* 'Starlight' provides masses of flower and is probably the most compact miscanthus yet seen.

Panicums are a personal favourite. Being a little shorter than the taller miscanthus, and therefore suitable for smaller areas, they have a generally upright habit and soft leaves which can turn incredible colours in the autumn. Their spikes of tiny flowers are so enthusiastically produced that more solid perennials such as echinacea planted nearby appear to be floating on the cloud-like masses of flower. *Panicum* 'Heavy Metal' is well named for its stems, leaves and flowers, all of which have a quite tall (1.5m), upright habit, and are of a uniform powder blue grey that is so effective with such a wide range of perennials. I enjoy a line of these grasses adjoining groups of *Eupatorium maculatum* 'Atropurpureum' and *Veronicastrum virginicum*. Well known for its amazing deep red 'fall' colouration and attractively upright habit is *Panicum* 'Shenandoah'(1.2m), while a rather new cultivar *Panicum* 'Northwind' (1.2m+), provides a strongly upright accent, flowers well, and has really warm brown autumnal tones.

Fountain grasses (*Pennisetum*) provide masses of flower at a lower height of generally less than 1 metre where their fluffy caterpillar like flowers reflect the slightest amount of morning or afternoon sunshine. This backlit effect is simple to achieve with most of the grasses by simply planting them where the sun will be seen coming from behind the flowers. The effect is magical. *Pennisetum* 'Fairy Tails' is new and rather exciting, with freely produced strongly upright tail-like flowers. *Pennisetum* 'Red Head' is a recently introduced unrivalled 'must have', with large initially red flowers that quickly turn to smoky grey-black.

In my garden, cutting back borders in the autumn is a thing of the past. An annual spring clean, cutting down, weeding and tidying anytime from late

February to early April is not only less work, it is more beneficial to wildlife by providing food and shelter, and allows the grasses to provide us with a seasons worth of subtle drama and interest.

Apart from the annuals, all grasses are either deciduous or evergreen and their pruning and care very much depends on which group they belong to. The deciduous group includes all the larger wow factor grasses such as pennisetum, miscanthus, panicum and calamagrostis whose stems while turning beige in autumn stay intact for the winter months and which subsequently need cutting back anytime from late February though to the end of March. Pruning simply consists of cutting the old growths off at ground level to make way for the new seasons growth. If the old stems are to be removed and composted then the stems can be conveniently removed in one piece with a cut to the base. However it is becoming accepted practice to leave the old stems on the border as a mulch in which case the old growths should be cut in smaller sections. Large old clumps which have begun to lose vigour can be divided in the spring.

Evergreens are usually smaller foliage types and often do not need much maintenance at least in the early years. *Ophiopogon* and some sedges such as *Carex* 'Ice Dance' may go for a number of years with virtually no attention while others such as the shorter lived *Festuca glauca* and *Nassella (Stipa) tenuissima* for example will almost certainly need attention after a year or so. Removal of any dead or dying foliage can be done at any time of year and often a rake through will improve the more finer leaved varieties sufficiently. However if the leaves are damaged or otherwise past their best cutting back the old leaves by about a third or even more is fine but it must be done while the plant is actively growing, say from April through to July, and not when it is dormant which is likely to severely damage the plant. Shorter lived grasses will need dividing every few seasons in order to maintain vigour but many longer lived evergreens may not need such treatment for many years. *CGS member Neil Lucas is owner of Knoll gardens in Wimborne, Dorset. Neil has several gold medals to his name including eight consecutive Golds at Chelsea for his grasses.*

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