

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES by Margery Fish

AN occasional clump of ornamental grass among the flowers acts as a foil. The tall ones add grace and welcome height, the dwarfs make carpets of different colours. They need not take up much room and only a very few are determined spreaders, and these can be controlled.

Where there is plenty of room, pampas grass (*cortaderia* or *gynerium*) is really lovely and is valuable because it flowers so late in the year that its showy plumes hang on for most of the winter. The Victorians spoilt it for many of us by cramming enormous plants into little gardens, but given room and a good landscape setting, it is attractive all through the year and the only attention it needs is a match set to it on a still day early in the year to get rid of the old growth. There is a dwarf form for smaller gardens; a very tall one where space is no object, and a soft pink one for variety. *Arundo donax* is another tall and imposing plant, with 8 ft. blue-grey leaves, and does best if cut to the ground each spring.

Beloved of the Victorians

Another grass beloved of the Victorians and having a renewal of popularity today is *Phalaris arundinacea variegata*, Ribbon Grass or Gardeners' Garters. It spreads if given the chance, and to enjoy its company without reservations, it can be planted in a large drainpipe sunk in the ground. At the back of the border it can be allowed to produce its 3 ft. flower spikes, but near the front it is more effective if kept cut to a carpet of pale green and white.

The damp-loving *Glyceria aquatica variegata* has a great deal of pink in its striped leaves and is very handsome, but it needs plenty of room or else great control. *Acorus calamus variegatus* and *A. gramineus elegantissimus* also like a damp situation and are lovely from the moment they produce their new growth in brilliant shades of red, cream and green. *Cyperus vegetus*, the fascinating reed rush, with flower heads like green feathers with a bronze sheen, is of American origin and has to be grown in a damp situation in hot dry climates but

in England seems to do best in a normal flower bed. I notice it usually sows itself when growing in full sun. The leaves of *Elymus glaucus* are like blue-grey satin, but it is one of the worst runners I know, and needs the drainpipe treatment.

Plants that look nice in the winter always appeal to me and there are three grasses that can be relied on however bad the weather. The two-foot arching feathery heads of *Stipa calamagrostis* turn light buff late in the year and remain attractive all through the winter. The pheasant grass, *Stipa (Apera) arundinacea*, changes its rich red tones for warm ivory and remains neat and graceful, and *Helictotrichon sempervivum glaucum* keeps its soft blue-grey colour and remains a large graceful clump.

A tall and graceful grass for a formal planting is *Miscanthus sinensis*, which has several elegant variegated forms. Both *Panicum virgatum* and *P. proliferum* take on warm tones in late summer, and the narrow, silver, frayed leaves of *Luzula nivea* shows up the graceful white flower heads. *Luzula sylvestris marginata* has a suggestion of white at the edges of its wide green leaves. It makes a thick clump which no weed can penetrate and is a good plant to use with tall subjects with little basal growth, such as *Verbena bonariensis* or herbaceous lobelias.

There are several dwarf grasses for odd corners or the front of a border. The young growth of *Arrhenatherum elatius bulbosum variegatum* is attractive with its stripes of white and green, and its bulbous root is interesting. *Holcus lanatus albo-variegatus* is tufted in growth and makes a thick carpet of pale leaves. Mr. Bowles' golden grass, *Milium effusum aureum*, is seldom more than a foot in height, and surrounds itself with little gold seedlings, and the cream variegations in the narrow leaved *Molinia coerulea variegata* are almost golden at times. *Dactylis glomerata* is an attractive little cocksfoot, and *Festuca glauca* a tiny silver-blue grass.

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