



MASSES AND MINGLINGS

BY KERSTIN P. OUELLET

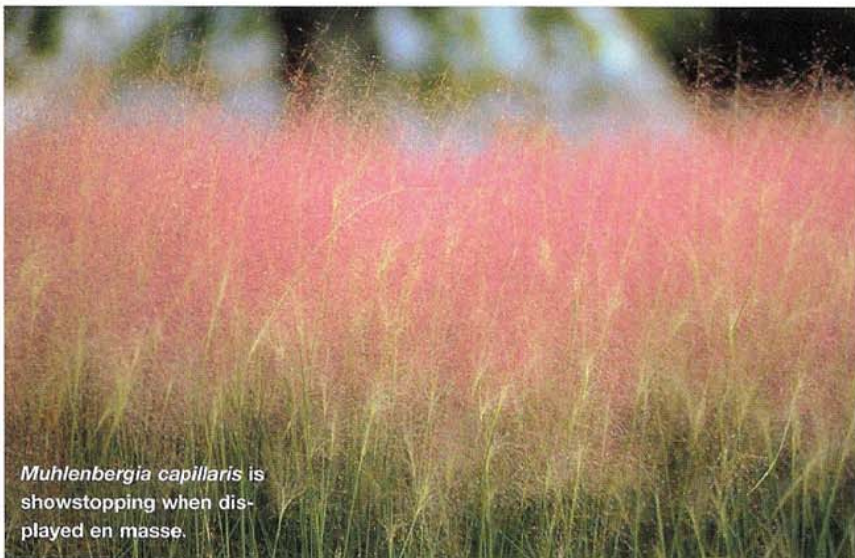
POSITIONING ORNAMENTAL GRASSES TO SELL

It's ironic but understandable that retailers struggle with the question of where and how to display ornamental grasses after all these years.

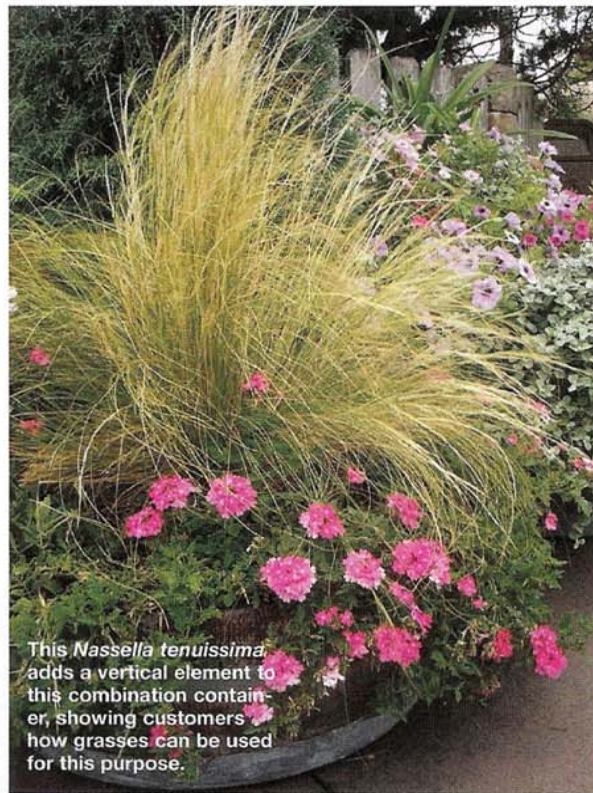
Ironic because grasses have been part of American gardens for more than a century, and understandable because they've waxed and waned in popularity over the years.

The 1980s saw a resurgence, thanks in no small part to avant-garde designers like Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, who featured miscanthus and calamagrostis prominently in some very visible public landscapes around Washington D.C. and elsewhere.

Another major source of exposure (and revenue) for grass growers has been commercial landscapes—business parks, zoos and golf courses. But such large-scale projects go direct from wholesaler to jobsite, bypassing retailers. Perhaps that's why effective garden center displays are the exception, not the norm. The largest and most public landscaping designed by many garden centers is the few hundred square feet around their roadfront sign.



Muhlenbergia capillaris is showstopping when displayed en masse.



This *Nassella tenuissima* adds a vertical element to this combination container, showing customers how grasses can be used for this purpose.

Cheri knows grasses. She's the sales manager and co-owner of Emerald Coast Growers, a wholesale propagator with three locations in Florida and one in Pennsylvania. Warm-season grasses are lined out in the sandy/loamy Panhandle soils on a 50-acre farm, while cool-season species are produced at the northern operation.

Grasses in Masses

Perhaps the most striking landscape use of ornamental grasses, especially larger types, is to mass them in bold sweeps. Such groupings can be used as background for colorful perennial and mixed borders, or as stand-alone monoliths. But few garden centers, and fewer home gardens, have room for a really large display of that sort.

The unfortunate result, says Cheri Markowitz, is that at a typical garden center, "There's the flowering stuff out front, and there's the woody landscape stuff in back. Grasses fall somewhere in between, and a lot of retailers don't know where to put them."

Besides, what works in the landscape often fails to impress on the bench. Clusters of pots just don't deliver the same impact as an actual planting; grasses, especially when not flowering, are frankly pretty boring if just lined up on the shelf.

Don't be that boring nursery. Let your display mirror what most of your customers will probably do with them in the garden anyway: Don't mass them; mingle them. Sprinkle them in among perennials and annuals in mix-and-match garden vignettes. Their true calling is to serve as accents, punctuation marks if you will, in the overall flow of the landscape narrative.

Combining is not only a great way to show grasses at their best, it's an opportunity for cross merchandising. Smart department stores don't just show customers a blouse, a scarf and a skirt as stand-alone items in separate aisles. They match them. Juxtaposing complementary products to encourage add-on or incremental sales is a common tactic in supermarkets. Combinations that go well together often go to the register together.

Displaying grasses and perennials in tandem helps solve another problem, i.e., the annoying tendency of tall grasses to blow over as soon as your back is turned. This hardly makes them unique: You face the same dilemma with tall perennials and even shrubs.

Cheri suggests benching them like an island planting, massing groups of grasses at the center and surrounding them with progressively shorter perennials, shrubs, even annuals. It needn't be, and shouldn't be, overly large or deep; you want customers to be able to reach into the middle. The surrounding lower-growing items will help stabilize top-heavy grasses while showing them off to their best advantage.

Another way to mix things up: Grasses make terrific vertical elements in combo containers. Among the best-selling grasses for this purpose or alone are the annual *Pennisetum x advena* Rubrum and its offspring, Fireworks and Skyrocket.

Showing Off

Cheri is well aware of the challenges in displaying grasses effectively. She believes that "many times (consumers) go into a garden center looking for grasses, and what they see is disappointing. The way grasses are grown sometimes isn't conducive to selling them."

The American gardening public unfortunately has a short attention span when it comes to buying and planting for their homes. And

Pennisetum Fireworks (left) and Skyrocket make gorgeous vertical elements in pots on their own.



also unfortunately, many grasses don't come into their own, filling a large pot and flowering with a flourish, until that window of opportunity is nearly shut.

"It's a regional thing," Cheri believes. "You want to get them out there when you can, when they're looking great—just like your blooming perennials. Timing is everything." She cites a local garden center where *Muhlenbergia capillaris* is displayed en masse in full bloom and in full view from the road. That particular grass has fine, wispy flowers. A single pot doesn't make much of a statement. But gang up a few dozen, or a hundred, and "it's spectacular," she said.

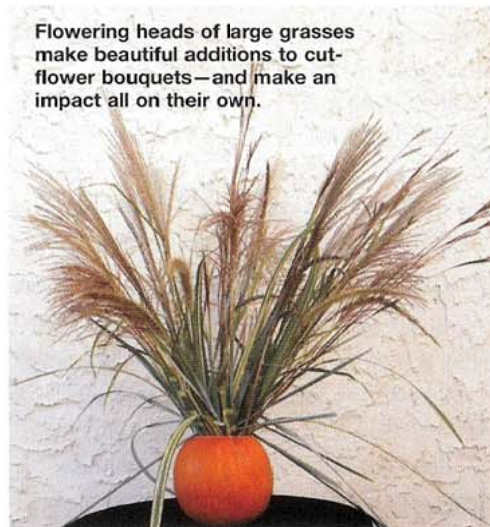
For spring sales try colorful, early-finishing types like festuca, calamagrostis and eragrostis Tallahassee Sunset. When pots aren't as compact and full as you'd like, your staff and POP materials need to convince customers that it'll look terrific once they get it settled into their garden.

Grasses in Vases

When considering grasses as cut flowers, one naturally thinks first of the bloom. Many grasses, such as miscanthus and cortaderia, have beautiful, showy plumes. Most are earth tones, white to buff to tan, but there are also some great colors—ruby red, pink, purple.

But their usefulness doesn't end at flowers. Many grasses, especially larger ones, are a terrific source of cut foliage for bouquet fillers. Consider the numerous variegated

Flowering heads of large grasses make beautiful additions to cut-flower bouquets—and make an impact all on their own.



miscanthus varieties. Some are solid green; Morning Light and Cosmopolitan feature white or cream stripes that run lengthwise along the blade. Gold Bar, Zebrinus and Super Stripe, among others, have gold bands running across the blade for an intriguing checkered pattern. All mix nicely with other elements in the vase. If you find it necessary to cut any back, don't just toss the cuttings. Show 'em off!

Trial and error will reveal what works best in your sales yard, but grasses aren't an oddity anymore. Designers long ago embraced them as an accepted and effective landscape element. Gardeners may be lagging behind, but they're ready to try something new. Show them how it's done. **GP**

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