Muhly grass puts on a show during the fall

Ornamental grasses are growing in popularity all over the country. Today’s nurseries offer a wider variety of sizes, shapes, and colors compared to 30 years ago when pampas grass was the standard. Now there are grasses to suit any site in a range of sizes from six inches to more than ten feet tall.

Grasses are attractive throughout the growing season but many put on a show during the fall. The foliage of many grasses change color as daylength gets shorter and temperatures cool. Seed heads also develop in summer to early fall, often changing color with the seasons.

When using ornamental grasses, consider planting them in groups. The size of the landscape and the mature plant size will dictate how many to install. Low weeping grasses look great planted in mass to create large sweeping drifts of color. Larger maturing varieties are sometimes used to create a color or texture change as an individual accent plant.

Try including them in a perennial bed for a texture change. Taller varieties can be used to create a screen or backdrop whereas smaller ones work well as a border. Others look great in containers especially when mixed with a trailing flowering annual.

Grasses add a lot of character to a landscape because of the various textures and colors. They also add motion to a landscape because they respond to the slightest breeze. Many of the new varieties are chosen because of the added bonus of colorful flowers. Some grasses are very stiff and upright whereas others have a soft, weeping growth habit.

Before selecting a grass for the landscape, find out the plants mature size and whether the grass is deciduous or evergreen. Deciduous grasses die back during the winter months, changing to various colors before retiring to a straw color. Depending on the location, the deciduous grasses might be displayed with evergreen plants to maintain color during the winter months.

Match the grass to the site as some have high moisture requirements whereas others prefer dry sites. Grasses are divided into two growth categories, clumpers and spreaders. Clumpers expand in size every year by forming new divisions but stay in the general area. Grasses that are runners spread by
underground rhizomes and creep in many different directions. These are often used as ground covers and are very effective in stabilizing an area to prevent erosion.

Muhly grass, *Muhlenbergia capillaris*, is by far one of my favorite native grasses. It is native to pine flatwoods, coastal upland and beach dunes, and sandhill communities.

Leaves are two to three feet long, blue-green to gray-green, and are very narrow, almost threadlike. Leaves arch to form a compact mound. It has a stiff, upright growth habit which makes this markedly different from many other grasses.

Delicate purple flowers emerge in the fall well above the foliage and can literally cover the foliage. It flowers from October through November and is best displayed in mass. These are tough plants that will grow in hot, dry sandy soils and are very drought tolerant once established. Plant in full sun to light shade.

Muhly grass is virtually maintenance free except in those instances where you might want to remove the brown foliage in the spring by slightly trimming it before new growth emerges.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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