

# Master Gardeners of Ontario

What's Growing On  
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Fall, 2012

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## Ornamental Grasses – Forget the Good, What about the Bad and the Ugly?

Belinda Gallagher, Master Gardener Emerita

As Master Gardeners we tend to be part of one plant family or another - the 'must plant natives' family, the 'rosarian' family, the 'have to have every new cultivar' family, the 'feed the family' family - you get the idea. I have never met a Master Gardener that is not a plant geek of one kind or another. As plant geeks, we grow, tend, coddle, monitor, pamper and generally spoil our plants and gardens

But as Master Gardeners we have a different role, and in my humble opinion, a different responsibility – we advise. And in this role as advisor it is important for us to recognize our clients may not have the plant nurturing drive that we do. This is never more important as it is when we suggest specific plants and in this case ornamental grasses.

Nothing, and I mean nothing, discourages a newbie gardener more than an uncontrollable plant. In the ornamental grasses we have a few that are readily available from the nursery trade and sometimes recommended.

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## In this Issue

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## Three Little Bluestems

Mary Beerman – Durham

Grasses continue to be garden favourites: hardy, drought tolerant, stunning when planted en masse, undulating in the breeze, flashing light. Little Bluestem is no different. *Schizachyrium scoparium* is the junior to *Andropogon gerardii*, Big Bluestem. Also known as Prairie Beard Grass, Little Bluestem can be found listed as *Andropogon littoralis* and as *Andropogon scoparius*. Native to North America from Quebec to Alberta and south to Arizona and Florida this grass grows in prairies and open woods and on dry fields and hills, hardy to zone 3. Little Bluestem grows to 100cm tall, flowering from July to September.



*Little Bluestem*

Diminutive only in its name this warm season grass is favoured for its fine foliage, distinctive upright flowers and clump forming habit. As a warm season grass it requires full sun and looks its best from late summer to winter, turning to shades of red to purple and remaining showy throughout the winter. The best time to divide this grass is in the spring and when new growth is about 20 cm tall. Planting and transplanting should be done only when the soil is warm. Planting too early may cause the roots to rot and in the fall the roots may not grow enough to become established enough before the wet and cold of winter. Little Bluestem can be cut back to 6-10 cm before new growth starts to appear and after the

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*What's Growing On is the newsletter of the Master Gardeners of Ontario, Inc. It is published 4 times per year in January, April, July, and October.*

*Ornamental Grasses from page 1*

These are the grasses that I NEVER recommend:

- *Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* (ribbon grass, gardener's garters). This grass spreads by underground stems and seeds and can change the hydrology of an area by trapping silt. Used by landscapers and gardeners as a variegated green and white groundcover, this grass can completely overwhelm any site with a modicum of moisture. Clumps often revert to solid green that is even more invasive. Note that the species is native in North America although experts believe the invasive tendencies come from interbreeding with European strains.



Ribbon Grass

- *Arundo donax* (giant reed, bamboo reed). Most often offered for sale in the striped form, 'Variegata', this grass is popular for attaining great heights, up to 14' in cool temperature regions. The variegated form is not as robust and is hit and miss in Zone 5 in terms of overwintering. Propagation is possible by stem cuttings and hence will grow from the tiniest piece. It requires constant control in a garden setting.
- *Spartina pectinata* (prairie cord grass) – This native is usually available in the yellow and green striped form 'Variegata' and usually recommended for ponds or water gardens. It is an aggressive spreader requiring constant control.

Recommend with CAUTION:

- *Chasmanthium latifolium* (wild oats, mistakenly Northern sea oats) – can be an aggressive self-seeder on light soils.
- *Imperata cylindrical* var. *rubra* (Japanese blood grass) – solid green form listed as noxious weed in USA. Climate change (warming) may allow *rubra* form to become more aggressive.

- *Miscanthus sinensis* (maiden grass, eulalia grass) – This popular ornamental is appearing on more and more invasive plant lists and there is some evidence that earlier flowering is allowing seed to become viable. Opt for sterile cultivars.

My conclusion, be cautious. Be sure that you know the exact growing habit of the grass you recommend. If you have not grown it yourself, find someone who has and get his or her advice.

Use good reference books/sites. It is worth noting that of the many available books on ornamental grasses, few seriously discuss their invasive potential. So I recommend *Invasive Plants: Guide to Identification and the Impacts and Control of Common North American Species* by Sylvan Ramsey Kaufman and Wallace Kaufman, Stackpole Books, 2007. Also, *The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses* by Rick Darke, Timber Press, 1999.

## A Whisper in the Wind

Edythe Falconer, Ottawa

Grasses have arrived from plains, pastures and hay fields. Perhaps they are back to reclaim old territories? My first acquaintance with these airy and sylphine flora was when my genes found a place for me in the middle of the Saskatchewan prairies in what was then its Parkland Belt. We were the transition area between bald prairie and the forested northern half of the province. The area is more open now - OK as long as there are no prolonged droughts. Native prairie grasses did keep the soil in place before we began cropping the land. Sand dunes on beaches in Panhandle Florida are partially protected by *Uniola paniculata* aka Sea Oats. A hefty fine discourages removal.

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### MGOI Board of Directors

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*Little Bluestems* from page 1  
cold weather is over.

*Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Blaze' possesses all *S. scoparium*'s qualities but differs in colouring and size. Blaze tends to be a little smaller, 50-100 cm, and has grey green foliage. It has tiny flowers 100-120cm above the ground.

*Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Itasca' is an even smaller version of *S. scoparium*, standing 40-80 cm tall. Itasca blooms earlier than Blaze or *S. scoparium* and has stunning fall colour. Itasca varies in colour ranging from reds to blues to purples with its culms one colour and its leaves numerous colours. In the fall after hard frost it turns russet. Itasca can also tolerate open shade.

*Schizachyrium scoparium* 'The Blues' stands mid range for a Little Bluestem, 50-80 cm. The beauty of 'The Blues' is its colour; the foliage is intense blue until frost when the leaves and stems turn shades of purple. The Blues flowers late summer.

While you give these 'little' ones garden consideration keep in mind they are true low maintenance plants: low nutritional soil values and low watering. In fact in too rich and moist a soil they tend to flop. These light catchers are a stunning addition especially when backlit. Their colour array as the seasons change makes Little Bluestem a strong foundation plant to build your garden around or add a structure and a colour punch. Their final selling point is their ecological importance; providing seed and cover to a wide variety of wildlife.

## A Grass for Any Aspect

Isabel Belanger – Etobicoke

There is an ornamental grass to fit any aspect of any garden, whether sunny or shady, big or small, wet or dry. Ornamental grasses can range from under 1' to over 10' tall. They can be annual – easily grown from seed - or perennial. Many ornamental grasses prefer sun, however some will grow in shade. Some prefer dry conditions and others need regular irrigation. Many full sun grasses tolerate drought and lean soil conditions. Although not true grasses, closely related grass-like *Carex* and *Luzula* grow well in a shady aspect.

Tall ornamental grasses provide a strong vertical element in the garden. Short ornamentals are useful as ground covers or massed at the front of the border. The inflorescences of tall grasses move with the wind and create sound in the garden. Their colour often changes throughout the season and with

changing light conditions. Ornamentals with tall leaves such as cultivars of *Miscanthus sinensis* are large and architectural, and are often used as specimens.

Generally, grasses fall into two categories: cool season which grow early in the season; and warm season which grow once the soil warms up in summer. However, many cool season grasses produce inflorescences during the summer and retain them well into winter. Warm season grasses produce their inflorescences in the fall. No matter the type, many provide interest over three seasons with fall colour and spectacular winter interest.

Native prairie grasses such as *Andropogon gerardii*, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, *Bouteloua curtipendula*, and *Panicum virgatum*, among others, prefer sun. A large warm season native grass that grows well in shade is *Chasmanthium latifolium*. All provide brilliant fall colour, and can be used as specimens, hedges, massed to provide an undulating flow, and are useful for transitioning from a



*Molinia* 'Skyracer'

formal to informal look.

*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' is a current favourite, and is a cool season grass that provides vertical interest in the sunny garden with in-

florescences extending about 2 feet above its leaves. It creates an airy look in the landscape, looks great massed, but can also hold its own and winter over in the right container as it is not too particular about rich soil. Another airy cool season grass is *Molinia caerulea* 'Sky Racer' with inflorescences easily reaching 6' high above a 1-2' mound of leaves. Tiny Kinglets love to eat its ripe seeds. Both these grasses look good at the front of the border since their leaves are short and their inflorescences are tall but airy: a translucent curtain through which to view the rest of the garden.

A number of shade tolerant grasses are short, but they create structure and flow for the front of the shade border. Favourites include *Hakonechloa* (and cultivars), a cascading Japanese grass useful for edging pathways and borders. Also useful planted en masse are *Carex* and *Luzula* species. *Hakonechloa* and *Carex* are especially effective in brightening up a shady situation.

More in depth information can be found at [www.bluestem.ca](http://www.bluestem.ca) as well as in The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses by Rick Darke.

## Events

October 16 at 7 p.m. – Norfolk County presents Paul Zammit – ‘Drama in the Fall Garden’ at Eising Garden Centre, 814 Cockshutt Road, Simcoe (Just south of Hwy # 3 at Renton). Admission is free and open to the public. For more information email [norfolkmg@yahoo.com](mailto:norfolkmg@yahoo.com)

October 20, 8:30 – 3:00 p.m. – Technical Update presented by Simcoe County - Back to the Future - Old Techniques Finding a New Life, held at Simcoe County Museum. Cost \$40.00. For more information contact Linda Peacock at (705) 424-2179 or [peacockfamily@ymail.ca](mailto:peacockfamily@ymail.ca)

October 22 at 8:00 p.m. – North York Garden Club - A Year in Review at North York St Luke's Lutheran Church, 3200 Bayview Avenue. Photography contest includes the winner for the 2013 yearbook cover photo. For more information, contact Pat Cappelli at [patcappelli@yahoo.ca](mailto:patcappelli@yahoo.ca)

Saturday, January 12, 2013 at the Toronto Botanical Garden – Toronto Master Gardeners Technical Update – Water Wise Gardening

Sunday February 24, 2013 at Victoria East Golf Club, Guelph – Guelph and Wellington County annual ‘Day In The Garden’. Full details will be on the website at [www.gwmastergardeners.mgoi.ca/](http://www.gwmastergardeners.mgoi.ca/) in December

October 5, 2013 in Kingston – Technical Update presented by Rideau 1000 Islands MGs – Edible Gardens – Details to follow – For more information contact Donald Large 613 544 5141 or [dlarge13@cogeco.ca](mailto:dlarge13@cogeco.ca)

## Milestones

### New MGITs

Essex-Windsor – Susan Boucher, Sue Kelsh

Etobicoke – Aline Kouhi-Klemencic, Dyann Sheppard

Guelph and Wellington County – Virginia Gordon

Mississauga – Josephine Chao, Susan Goyer

Ottawa-Carleton – Susan Bicket

Peterborough – Annie English, Mary Jane Parker, MJ (Mary-Jane) Pilgrim

Quinte Tweed – Mike Pickard

Simcoe County – Cheryle Leechman

Thunder Bay – Linda Bobinski, Dan Fulton, Holly Hamilton,

### New MGs

Durham – Elaine Davidson

Guelph and Wellington County – Kathy Grainger, Julie Kron

Lanark – Victor Wark

London Middlesex – Tony Rudd

Mississauga – Janice Ekeland, Diane Rogers, Michelle Wilson

North Bay – Lynn Farintosh, Judy Hendry, Carol Walker

Ottawa-Carleton – Nancy McDonald Quinte Tweed – Barbara Fowler, Marlene Phillips

Simcoe County – Marie-Laure Varcoe, Catherine Waffle

### 5 Years

Etobicoke – Anna Arabczuk, Diana Baxter, Lillian Brown

Guelph and Wellington County – Marcia Barron

Norfolk – Jackie Cave

Ottawa-Carleton – Josie Pazdzior

Peterborough – Judy Bernard, Cathy Fraser, Anne Milne, Etela Vojnic

### 10 Years

Guelph and Wellington County – Ann Ironside

Mississauga – Dorothy Brand, Emma Chow, John Hethrington, Bill Pooke, Susan Quirk, Sandra Vander Wilp

Norfolk – Mary Dillon, Anne Faulkner, Debra Featherstone, Dottie Smith

Peterborough – Dianne Westlake, Gary Westlake

### 15 Years

Essex-Windsor – Orval Hodgkin

### 25 Years

Lanark – Helen Halpenny, Margaret Inwood

### Emeritus

Essex-Windsor – Joan Jolin

North Bay – Helen McCombie, Vickie Wiemer (Both are founding members.)

Toronto – Joan Beattie, Anne Kotyk, Catherine Park, Karen Silvera, Lucy van Wyk

### In Memoriam

Howard Fraser McClung passed away August 14, 2012 in his 90th year. Fraser was a long-standing member of Master Gardeners, attending several International Master Gardener Conventions over the years, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He began with the Haldimand-Dunnville group and was later a founding member of Norfolk County Master Gardeners, established in 2000. Fraser was granted emeritus status in 2009 yet still managed to attend Master Gardener and Horticultural Society functions whenever possible. Fraser was also a vendor at the Simcoe Farmers Market for over 30 years. He was a great friend to all and will be sorely missed by everyone who knew him.





*Participants at this year's summer course for Master Gardeners at the Niagara School of Horticulture*

## MGs in Action:

### *MG summer course at Niagara*

Master Gardeners from all over the province converged on Niagara School of Horticulture for an upgrade to their skills and knowledge thanks to the wonderful staff at the college and a perfect garden for learning, and to June Streadwick for organising a great event. We saw and discussed Gypsy Moths, vegetable gardens and much much more. Niagara is also a great location to visit.

### *Guelph and Wellington County*

Four of our volunteers took part in a weekly TV series running in June and July. It was called 'Lets Get Growing'. Their talks covered soil and compost, buying perennials, how to plant a veggie garden, Mason bees and Iris borer.

### *Durham*

Zone 9 would like to thank Gini Sage, Elaine Davidson, Sherry Dodson, Karen Durnin and Ingrid Janssen for planning our first Zone Tech Update on September 23. It was a great success and Dugald Cameron of Gardenimport was the guest speaker.

### *Lanark County*

Master Gardeners and Algonquin College are hosting a series of 4 Horticultural Seminars beginning October 4. Contact Dale Odorizzi at odorizzi@storm.ca

### *Mississauga*

Congratulations! Philip Stuart, one of Mississauga's founding members (1994), celebrated his 95th birthday in July. Our warmest wishes to Philip!

### *Toronto*

Toronto has a new website, check it out at [www.torontomastergardeners.ca](http://www.torontomastergardeners.ca)

## Seed Exchange at the Toronto Botanical Garden

from Landcape Ontario

The Toronto Botanical Garden Seed Exchange is in full swing. If you have seed you wish to donate, please follow these steps to package and submit them to the TBG 2013 SEEDEX.

1. The TBG Website has a video on how to collect and clean seeds (but don't worry they will clean the seeds for you).
2. To Collect, simply cut off the spent flower heads complete with seeds and drop them directly into a paper bag or envelope.
3. Clearly label your envelopes or paper bags (this is very important), with the botanical name and date collected, both on the outside of the package and on a piece of paper inside. Also include the source of the plant, such as the garden centre or plant sale where you purchased it.
4. Store your seed packages in a cool, dry place or in the fridge until you can drop them off at the TBG.

They can be dropped off any time in September and October at Reception, addressed to Head Gardener, Horticulture. Over the Winter the TBG volunteer team will clean, sort and repackage your donated seeds. In February watch the TBG website and Garden e-news for information on how you can order from the 2013 SEEDEX list.

## The Survey Says?

In the last issue we asked about plants for a shady area. A few MGs filled out the survey and we have [uploaded a table of the suggestions](#) with their reasons to the website. Here is a list in no particular order: ferns, hostas, *Epimedium*, hydrangea, geranium, hellebores, solomon's seal, *Asarum*, dwarf *Aruncus*, *Rodgersia*.



*Rodgersia*

The suggestion for this issue's survey came from Norma Evans in Peterborough. We would like you to nominate your favourite hydrangea and tell us a little about it and why you like it. Click on this link to give us your opinion and we will publish the results next issue. Just [fill in this form](#) and click on the submit button. We ask that you provide your name and group so that we know that you are not one of those nasty cyber robots. Please send us your suggestions for other short surveys we can challenge Master Gardeners with.

## 2012 Coordinators' Conference - October 13

editors

It is hard to believe that another year has passed and we are preparing for another Coordinators' Conference. This is an important time for Coordinators, Zone Directors and others to get together and set directions for MGOI for the coming year. This is also our AGM so please send representatives from your group. Contact [editors@mgoi.ca](mailto:editors@mgoi.ca) to donate items for the silent auction. By the way, it's fun too.

*Ontario Horticultural Association and  
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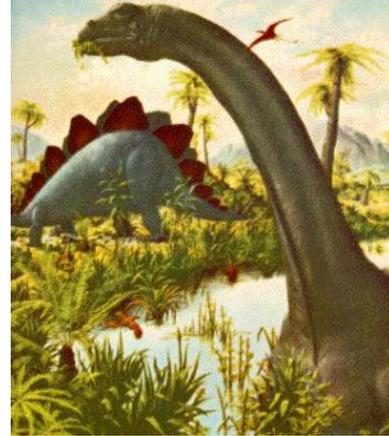


Here is the [latest issue OHA's newsletter the Trillium](#).

## Which Came First?

Tom McCavour, Simcoe County

It's a chicken or egg question – did grass come first or did the dinosaurs and other animals come first? Textbooks on evolution teach us that by examining fossils, grasses evolved about 55 million years ago, after the extinction of the dinosaurs



65 million years ago. So what did the dinosaurs eat? Well the archaeologists have been hard at work and find that by examining dinosaur coprolites, that means poop to you and me, they have found the remains of at least five types of grasses. So grass did exist at the time of the dinosaurs and some of them ate it. Just a minor error of 10 million years in evolutionary theory - literally a dung dilemma. And it is also quite probable that grass is much older, because the grasses that were discovered are closely related to the rice and bamboo species, which can be traced back some 107 to 129 million years ago. So the Bible had it right after all. Vegetation appeared on the third day of creation while living creatures did not appear until the sixth day.

Again, on an evolutionary scale, the grass family has become one of the most diverse and abundant groups of plants on the earth. It includes over 10,000 accepted species and is the fifth largest plant family. Ornamental grasses, which have become very popular in recent years, include not only true grasses but also sedges, rushes, restios, and cat-tails. All are monocotyledons with narrow leaves, and parallel veins. These ancient survivors bring joy to our gardens throughout the year with their beautiful upright lines, providing colour, texture and motion.

## An Alternate Shade 'Grass'

editors

We often get asked for suggestions for grasses for shade. Daylilies will grow in shade. They just do not flower as much but the foliage has the look of a grass.



## Canadian Master Gardeners' Awards of Excellence

### Guidelines

*Deadline for applications is December 31, 2012*

The 1st National MG Conference will present awards of excellence to local MG groups in Canada to recognize outstanding projects that demonstrate excellence in the delivery of MG services to the public. The awards recognize and applaud the great work that is being done throughout the country by local MG groups and will provide ideas and motivation for other groups to broaden their activities. Please review the MGOI website for all details of the awards.

All Master Gardener activities are significant and important. The awards, however, are intended to highlight activities that reflect excellence in group projects, not the individuals who do outstanding work.

Each local MG group is encouraged to examine the projects that it has completed in the recent past or is currently in the process of delivering to identify which projects it can submit for consideration.

The Awards of Excellence are modeled on the International Master Gardeners Search for Excellence Awards that are presented at the IMG's biennial conferences. Examples of the types of projects that have won IMG Search for Excellence awards in the past can be seen on their website

[www.extension.org/mastergardener](http://www.extension.org/mastergardener)

## 2013 Canadian Master Gardener Conference

Come Grow With Us, first ever Canadian Master Gardener Conference, takes place April 5th - 7th at Deerhurst Resort in Huntsville, Ontario. Check out the website [www.mgointernationalconference.ca](http://www.mgointernationalconference.ca) for a list of exciting speakers, breakout sessions and registration information. Some sessions are close to full, so register now.

Check out the conference message board for car pooling, long lost MGs and proposed potential rev-elry.

### *A Whisper from page 2*

My parents cropped wheat, barley, oats and rye. They also grew other grasses for hay to feed horses and cattle, and ultimately us. Remembering these wonderful nurturing grasses makes me want to plant some as ornamentals next year as a sentimental tribute to my grass-dependent past.

As of 2012 I now boast some of the currently popular ornamental grasses. One of these – *Cyperus papyrus* – I've managed to overwinter in my sunroom. Now it is planted next to the pond where its "umbrellas" are a delight. *Festuca glauca* aka Blue Fescue was my very first ornamental grass. It is highly drought resistant even in a year like 2012! Then there are my errant *Phleum pretense* - aka Timothy – that I have opportunistically used as a marginal background where everything more valuable kept getting devoured. Recent acquisitions – six *Carex morrowii* 'Ice Dance' aka *Carex* and one *Helictotrichon sempervirens* aka Blue Oat Grass are very promising – one for shade, one for full sun. Both are clumpers. Beware of spreaders unless you really want ground cover.

Design-wise grasses can be planted in groups, as specimen plants, along borders and corridors and in pots. Do your research. 'Different strokes for different folks' applies to grasses as well as people. Some are annuals and others are perennials. Either way grasses offer a wonderful range of color, texture, form and height. Sensual, sinuous, slender, silky, lacy, swishing, rustling, mysterious, eerie, delicate, frothy feathery, majestic, elegant – something for everyone!

For the child lying in a sea of prairie grass, staring dreamy and wide-eyed at the sea of blue that is a prairie sky everything seemed possible and happily much of it was. The next desirable possibility? Simply experimenting with new examples of this fascinating group of plants.