



# Fondness for grasses

**Increasing popularity is fueling  
a drive for new varieties, innovations**

BY DEBBIE TEASHON

**T**he increasing popularity of ornamental grasses in the home landscape is fueling a drive for new cultivars and innovation at many nurseries in Oregon.

Ornamental grasses are easy-care plants with low water usage. They're sustainable and provide wildlife habitat, plus they're deer-resistant.

"Grasses provide a unique textural quality to the landscape that few other ornamentals can," said Mary Monney, sales team member for **Eshraghi Nursery** in Hillsboro, Oregon. "Their range of height, dramatic sprays, dancing plumes, and color through the season create an interest that can stand alone or help boost the beauty of their garden companions. Some are even evergreen! From modern to cottage garden and shade to sun, they have the propensity to fill numerous niches in any design."

Grasses are great additions to the garden as specimens, mass-planted, functional tall hedges or grown in meadows. With new introductions, garden centers keep the excitement alive with new offerings every year.

The beauty and versatility of ornamental grasses serve as a muse for garden designers and landscapers, inspiring them to craft unique and captivating landscapes. >>

***Hakonechloa macra* 'HakBri2' Lime Zest™** PHOTO  
COURTESY OF BRIGGS NURSERY



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“Whether gardeners are looking to create a modern meadow design — a top trend we’re watching for 2025 — or just want to add unique visual interest to the garden, we have so many stunning grasses to offer,” said Katie Tamony, chief marketing officer and trend spotter at **Monrovia**, a California-based wholesale nursery with its largest farm in Dayton, Oregon. “Ornamental grasses provide captivating texture and color all while being a low maintenance choice.”

### New varieties of Japanese forest grass

Every year, new Japanese forest grass introductions join the old standbys. Most of these grasses shine in the shade and offer another textural style not often available for the shadier side of the garden. The grasses’ waterfall effect is attractive in a border edged with them, spilling down a container, or used as an accent.

**Briggs Nursery**, a wholesale nursery in Elma, Washington, is at the forefront of the ornamental grass trend with its *Hakonechloa* introductions. The *Hakonechloa macra* ‘HakBri2’ Lime Zest™, a sport from *H. macra* ‘Aureola’, was honored with a 2024 Farwest Show New Varieties Showcase Award of Merit, while the *Hakonechloa macra* ‘Hakbri1’ Lemon Zest™, a sport from *H. macra* ‘All Gold’, received a 2023 Farwest Show New Varieties Showcase Award of Merit. These introductions are a testament to the beauty and appeal of these grasses.

Dan Meier, product development and efficiency manager for Briggs, believes Lime Zest™ will be a game changer and a top seller this year. “Already, there is excitement overseas over this plant,” he said.

What sets Lime Zest™ apart is its unique lime-colored foliage with white variegation that turns cream later in the season, without any gold or yellow tones in the leaves. The plum-colored new shoots in spring add to its allure. Lemon Zest™, with its vibrant chartreuse, lemon, and cream variegation, is the brightest of all *Hakonechloa* cultivars, adding a pop of color to any shaded area. Despite being smaller than others in the genus, it is an excellent addition to the shade plant offerings. Another 2024 introduction, *Hakonechloa* ‘Stripe It Rich’ PP19259, emerged from **Terra Nova Nurseries** as a tissue culture mutant. Golden leaves and a bright white variegation make the grass a compelling choice for the shade.

“This is a beautiful cultivar that has a bright white stripe in the center of its golden leaves. It is a beautiful shade-tolerant grass,” said Georgia Clay, plant selections manager for Monrovia Nursery.

### Eye-catching blue fescues

Besides Japanese forest grass, blue fescues have long been used in the landscape and nurseries have improved on them over the years. Cultivars that improve on the blue hue include *Festuca x* ‘Cool as Ice’. This one emerges from the ground a light green hue and in the summer it turns blue, leaving a two-toned effect with the green, said Eshraghi Nursery’s Monney.

This is also one fescue that will not die from the heat and humidity in areas with hot and humid summers.

### Colorful sedges



*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Fire Dragon’ Mystal™ PHOTO COURTESY OF PLANTHAVEN



*Carex comans* ‘Amazon Mist’ PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA



*Schizachyrium scoparium* ‘Smoke Signal’ PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA





**Festuca x 'Cool as Ice'** PHOTO COURTESY OF INTRINSIC INTRODUCTIONS



**Andropogon gerardii 'Red October'** PHOTO COURTESY OF INTRINSIC INTRODUCTIONS



**Hakonechloa macra 'All Gold'** PHOTO BY DEBBIE TEASHON

The Colorgrass® series, which includes the arching, evergreen sedge, *Carex comans* 'Amazon Mist', is known for its vibrant and unique color variations. This feature makes it a popular choice among landscapers and gardeners.

"Amazon Mist sedge is a beautiful finely textured *Carex* that we love for its twisting tips and silvery undersides," Clay said. "It brings a lot of texture and movement to the garden or containers while being easy to care for and maintaining good heat tolerance. This has quickly become one of my favorite container plants."

Kip Nordstrom, owner of Kip Nordstrom Design in Lake Oswego, Oregon, uses *Carex* in her landscape designs. She chooses companion plants that enhance the sedges.

"I have a stand of dwarf Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium* 'Little Joe Pye') at the right height to be interesting and never floppy. At the base lies a meandering *Carex* 'Everillo', a yellow-green edging grass. The Little Joe is now a tawny, brown, golden, and tan mix, which pairs beautifully with the sharp yellow-green *Carex* on the ground.

"Before autumn, the seed heads of 'Little Joe Pye' are pink, and they, too, look lovely with the *Carex*. I'm always fond of the combination," Nordstrom said. "It's one of my favorite fall looks."

Nordstrom uses sedges to enhance various areas. "One of my favorite grasses, *Carex* 'Bowles Golden', I placed next to a water feature. This grass is versatile and can be planted in different ways. Whether as a stand-alone plant, in containers, or for mass-planting, it's a great example of how one plant can serve multiple purposes in a landscape."

**Other ornamental grasses**

One of Nordstrom's favorite grass plantings at a local Lake Oswego church has inspired some of her designs. In a raised bed full of paperbark maples (*Acer griseum*), the trees are underplanted with a dwarf fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln').

"I always liked the elegant look," Nordstrom said. "The gorgeous trees with their peeling bark are underplanted with >>>



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this one grass. I've used the same grass as a shorter hedge under trees."

Nordstrom believes the grass works well in containers, as a stand-alone plant, and for mass planting.

"For some small spaces, I've used another *Pennisetum* 'Little Bunny,' that is smaller than *P.* 'Hameln'."

A Walters Gardens (Zeeland, Michigan) introduction, *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Smoke Signal', is a columnar grass with strong foliage that remains upright throughout the season without flopping over. It also has fantastic blue-green foliage that takes on deep purple and scarlet tones in late summer and fall.

A terrific grass for a meadow garden, it looks beautiful planted in mass with other sun-loving perennials mixed in or as a single accent.

A brand new grass Monrovia will be growing for the upcoming 2025 season is *Schizachyrium* 'Little Red Fox'. This is from Intrinsic Introductions (Hebron, Illinois) and has lovely red foliage in the mid to late summer, deepening in color throughout the fall. The selection also stays relatively short, only about 24–30 inches tall. It has sturdy, solid foliage and holds itself upright without flopping.

Blonde Ambition Blue Grama Grass (*Bouteloua* 'Blonde Ambition') is a North American native species selected from *Bouteloua gracilis*. The cold-hardy grass features blue-green foliage and gold summer flowers resembling tiny little brushes on top of sturdy stems. The tough seed heads last through winter, giving the plant

four seasons of interest.

Designing a meadow with Blonde Ambition and other native grasses and wildflowers creates a habitat for wildlife.

With trends towards using native plants and developing meadows, the appreciation of grass species and their cultivars is widening. Ornamental grasses are becoming an essential plant in the landscape.

Out of Germany came an open-pollinated seedling, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Fire Dragon' Mystal™. Anybody viewing the grass in October knows the name 'Fire Dragon', is appropriate — especially when they stand in front of the grass backlit by a low-in-the-sky autumnal sun. The exceptional plumes glow, and the grass blades almost look like someone lit a bonfire in October.

"A truly amazing season for many types of grass is fall when the plumes and seed heads are fully mature and cool weather draws out new hues that transform gardens everywhere," said Monney. "*Andropogon gerardii* 'Red October' and *Miscanthus* 'Fire Dragon' are particularly noteworthy for these features.

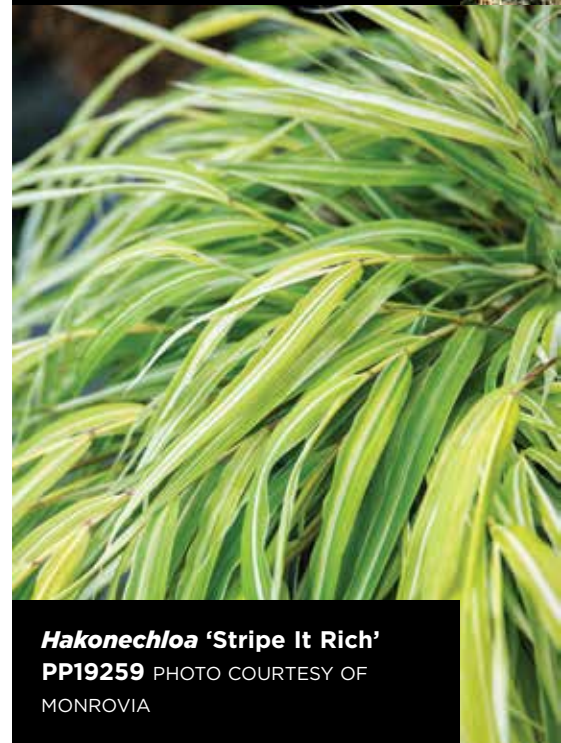
Red October Big Bluestem is dramatic enough, with dark green foliage and red tips for most of the year. However, the growing season finale steals the show.

Monney described it best: "*Andropogon* 'Red October' has red blooms above steel blue blades in late summer that morph into scarlet red with the first freeze."

Use with fall-flowering perennials; the tall grass is excellent as a scarlet-red accent. When mass-planted in a meadow, the grass



***Pennisetum alopecuroides***  
**'Hameln'** PHOTO BY KIP NORDSTROM



***Hakonechloa*** 'Stripe It Rich'  
**PP19259** PHOTO COURTESY OF  
MONROVIA

turns a field into a sea of red.

Meier of Briggs Nursery said North American grasses are the most popular. "These days, if it's native, it's hot!"

The species and cultivars of our North American native big bluestem grasses may be proving him right. ☺

*Debbie Teashon is co-author and photographer for Garden Communicators award-winning Gardening for the Homebrewer, and a regular contributor to regional magazines. Her gardening website is RainySide.com.*



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