

Ornamental Bunchgrasses

RUFINO OSORIO¹

Florida has a rich diversity of native grasses and a little less than 1 out of every 10 plants native to Florida is a grass (9.22%); however, native grasses tend to be overlooked by Florida gardeners. Grasses in seven different genera are discussed with an emphasis on their horticultural and ornamental qualities.

KEYWORDS: *Andropogon*, *Ctenium*, *Eragrostis*, *Muhlenbergia*, *Sorghastrum*, *Stipa*, *Tripsacum*, Poaceae, Florida, bunchgrasses, gardening, grass, landscape plant, native plant, perennial.

In gardening circles, the appreciation of grasses and grasslike plants has become the distinguishing characteristic of the sophisticated gardener. This is not surprising since grasses often have subtle charms that are not readily esteemed by novice gardeners. This is especially true of that certain type of gardener who is enamored of raucously colored flowers the size of dinner plates. However, in spite of lacking gaudy flowers, many grasses are spectacularly ornamental for a variety of reasons. Some are of such immense proportions that they have a noble, almost architectural or sculptural quality. A large number are of interest because of their growth form and beautiful foliage, a trait that makes them useful for adding textural variety in the garden. Grasses may also be noteworthy for their ornamental flower and seed spikes, as these are often adorned by attractive awns or silky hairs. Lastly, but certainly not the least of their special qualities, most grasses are both easily propagated and effortlessly cultivated.

Horticulturally, perennial grasses are divided into two principal groups: sodgrasses and bunchgrasses. The former produce elongated rhizomes and, when competing plants are eliminated, they will form a groundcover. Obviously, all of the cultivated lawn grasses are in this category. In contrast, bunchgrasses have such short rhizomes that new growths are formed in a close circle around the perimeter of the plant. Instead of forming a sod, the bunchgrasses tend to produce rounded clumps of varying dimensions. As such, they may be used in ways that would be unthinkable for a sodgrass, such as in flower beds, as accent plants or in formal garden schemes. Of course, these two categories merely describe the ends of a continuum and there are grasses that do not neatly fit into either group.

In this article, I describe some of our most common, readily grown, and ornamental native bunchgrasses. Some of them may seem far from appealing when growing in the wild. Yet, in cultivation, they will form dense, many-stemmed clumps of great beauty. All of the grasses listed here require full sun for the development of compact, sturdy and attractive growth. Florida does not lack ornamental grasses that prefer shade, but they are beyond the scope of this article. Some of these grasses naturally occur in wet areas, others in dry, sandy habitats. Fortunately, most are flexible and will tolerate quite a variety of soils with different moisture regimes. As for propagation, I find that seed is the easiest method. Although I have seen nurseries produce thousands of grass plants from divisions, I have not been able master the technique. In my experience, native grasses greatly resent root disturbance and divisions, under my conditions at least, slowly languish if kept on the dry side and root rot if kept too wet. Because of this, I generally stick to seeds as the preferred method of propagating grasses. Luckily, nearly all of the grasses in this article have seeds that germinate readily, some in as little as two days.

Our native bunchgrasses require a little care in order to maintain their most attractive appearance. Since their foliage is one of their principal assets, one should cut them back once a year to remove old, worn out foliage. I cut them back to within an inch or two of the ground. This may sound severe, but bear in mind that all of these grasses are fire adapted and they are actually rejuvenated by being cut to the ground periodically. This cutting back is best performed in late winter just before the plants begin their spring growth. Additionally, some of the grasses described here, especially the bluestems, can assume a most ungainly and coarse aspect when going to seed. Thus, these should have the old flower stems cut back just before they go to seed.

¹<http://www.rufino-osorio.com/contact.html>

The following brief summary of Florida bunchgrasses is by no means an exhaustive listing, but it serves as a starting point for the gardener who wishes to explore the amazing horticultural potential of our native grasses. Additionally, it also serves to provide the wildflower enthusiast with native alternatives to the foreign grasses that, thus far, have nearly completely dominated the grass-growing craze currently sweeping the United States.

ANDROPOGON

Andropogon gerardii, big bluestem, lives up to its name and is a robust plant that, in good soil with adequate moisture, easily reaches 6 feet in height. Plants are often glaucous, a technical term that refers to foliage with a silvery blue, often waxy, coating. Flower spikes are commonly borne in groups of three and fancifully resemble a bird's foot. Big bluestem is a large, statuesque grass that makes an excellent specimen plant. The principal habitat of this species is the tallgrass prairie of the Mississippi Valley, however, it extends south into the northern portion of peninsular Florida.

Andropogon ternarius, splitbeard bluestem, forms a loose clump and, vegetatively, is not nearly as attractive as some of the more densely growing bluestems. In spite of this, it is worth growing since, in full bloom, it produces masses of paired spikes dramatically borne on long stems to 6 feet or more high. The spikes are covered with white, silky hairs and this adds to their interest.

Andropogon virginicus, broomsedge, is a common native bunchgrass of open areas. The typical form is rather nondescript, but there is an extremely attractive variety with highly ornamental foliage: *Andropogon virginicus* var. *glaucus*. All parts of this variety are covered with a dense, intensely silvery white, waxy coating. The coating is nearly as white as chalk and is so thick that it may be scraped off, leaving a chalky residue on one's fingernails. Thus, this variety goes by the common name of *chalky bluestem*. In the wild, it is often found in highly acidic, very poor sandy soils in full sun. Under such conditions, the plants can scarcely be expected to achieve their full ornamental potential. However, it is quite striking in cultivation where it forms large rounded clumps of intensely silvery white foliage. Unfortunately, the plant deteriorates badly as it goes to flower and this is definitely a grass that one should cut to the ground annually.

CTENIUM

Ctenium aromaticum, toothache grass, is a low, densely clumping grass with dark green or bluish green foliage.

Commonly found in moist or even wet areas, it has two principal points of interest. The first, is its flower spikes, which form spirals at maturity, just like a little pig's tail. The second, is an aromatic principle found in its leaves that produces a novocaine-like numbness in the mouth when the leaves are chewed, thus accounting for the common name of *toothache grass*.

ERAGROSTIS

Eragrostis elliottii, Elliott's lovegrass, is a small, fine-leaved, bunchgrass that sports beautiful silvery blue leaves and masses of tiny flower spikes that create an attractive, almost cloudlike haze above the leaves. It is most commonly found on sandy soils where it seems to tolerate both extremely dry and very wet conditions. *Eragrostis spectabilis*, purple lovegrass, is similar in growth form to Elliott's lovegrass, but the innumerable tiny flower spikes create a striking reddish purple haze above the foliage.

MUHLENBERGIA

Muhlenbergia capillaris, hairgrass, is surely one of Florida's great horticultural treasures and is amongst the loveliest of all ornamental bunchgrasses. Hairgrass is often found on calcareous soils in full sun in areas that are seasonally moist yet subject to periodic drought. However, it is readily grown under ordinary garden conditions. The leaves, which are very thin to begin with, roll up into a very narrow, almost threadlike tube at maturity. Well grown plants form spectacular, nearly symmetrical hemispheres with large numbers of dark green, wiry, leaves. In bloom, the clumps produce tall stems of countless, but minute, pinkish or purplish red flowers. These create a reddish haze above the foliage, the effect being somewhat like that of a giant purple lovegrass. If possible, try to place hairgrass where it can be backlit by the sun against a dark background. Situated in this manner, flowering hairgrass becomes a stunning and breathtaking sight.

SORGHASTRUM

Yellow indiagrass and lopsided indiagrass, *Sorghastrum nutans* and *Sorghastrum secundum*, respectively, are two additional noteworthy bunchgrasses of singular beauty. Plants form large, rather loose clumps of little distinction. However, towards the end of summer and into the autumn, both indiagrasses produce dramatically tall spikes of numerous, extremely attractive flowers. The exterior of the bracts that enclose the true flowers are clothed in silky soft, golden brown hairs and, as a delightful contrast, one of the bracts of each flower bears a long, darker brown awn. The finishing touch is provided by the large yellow anthers. Thus, the total effect is that of a symphony of

brass, mahogany and gold. Like hairgrass, indian-grasses are at their best when their flower spikes are backlit by the sun.

STIPA

Stipa avenacioides, Florida needlegrass, is a smaller bunchgrass of open sandy sites. The inflorescence consists of a graceful, loosely flowered panicle that is made conspicuous by the extremely long awn borne by each floret. Because of its sandy habitat, I assumed that this species would be hard to grow under regular garden conditions. However, plants went from seed to full flowering in just a few months in four inch pots of well-drained houseplant mix.

TRIPSACUM

Tripsacum dactyloides, eastern gamagrass, is the largest and most robust of all the grasses listed here. In nature, it tends to form loose clumps but in cultivation the clumps become dense as a result of the numerous growths it produces. Its flower spikes are borne in groups of two or three and resemble a three-toed bird's

foot. The flowering stems are not particularly ornamental but they lend an interesting accent to the plant as a result of their great height. Eastern gamagrass is an excellent landscape plant for large estates where it can be allowed to grow to its ultimate size of 6 feet or more. It is particularly well-suited for growing along the edge of a pond and it is probably the most dramatic and ornamental of all our native grasses for such a situation. Although a grass of low, wet areas, it is very drought tolerant and, along with the following species, is becoming common as a Xeriscape™ plant.

Tripsacum floridanum, Florida gamagrass, is a delightfully miniature version of the preceding species, although the reader should note that the term “miniature” is relative since *Tripsacum floridanum* quickly reaches 3 feet in height with a 4 foot spread. Florida gamagrass has much narrower leaves than the preceding and, as a result, produces a more delicate and airy effect in the landscape. This, in combination with its shorter stature, makes it a more appropriate choice for smaller gardens.

NOTE: This is the author's PDF version of an article published in *The Palmetto*, the journal of the Florida Native Plant Society. The PDF and print versions differ substantially in formatting and pagination. Additionally, the content of the PDF version has been slightly modified from the print version in order to correct minor grammatical errors. The original print version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 1996. Ornamental Bunchgrasses. *The Palmetto* 16(1):5-6.

This PDF version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 2009. Ornamental Bunchgrasses. Internet: http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/ornamental_bunchgrasses.pdf.

Additional articles on native plants and wildflowers are available at <http://www.rufino-osorio.com>.