

# A Regal Miscanthus

A PLANT FOR EVERY GARDENER

**W**ith our gardens enveloped in a winter blanket, little thought is given to how they appear for the winter months. Canadians tend to garden for six months, usually from Victoria Day to Labour Day, neglecting the remaining six months. Even though our garden chores may be limited at this time of year, we can still appreciate the garden looking out from some sunny perch in the house.

As I write this article, I look out upon my own garden as interesting now as it is in full bloom during the growing season. Granted it lacks the detail that the summer garden contains but it does overcome that deficiency with 'bones' and plant maturity that the summer garden lacks.

I like to think that my garden is adventurous, with large bold plantings and masses of a favourite species. This effect is partly done to offset the scale of the Victorian house that the garden surrounds but it is also done because of my particular fondness for plants that have strong form through a major portion of the year. Also, being a professional I tend to spend more time in other peoples gardens rather than my own; an occupational hazard shared by many of my fellow professionals. When I come home at the end of a day the last thing I want to do is work in my own garden but I do want to stroll around and admire and observe the subtle changes that each day brings. Therefore a primary



*Annual and grass border in the garden.*

consideration when selecting plants for my own garden is their degree of maintenance; low maintenance!

My garden was designed to be low maintenance and at times I struggle to find chores to perform. I don't know of any other garden that requires less care and in fact receives it. Unless, of course, you consider those poor souls who perceive a weekly run with the lawn mower across their lot, gardening. The bold strong forms of the plants I use also compliment the massive scale of the house and provide a long season of interest. Unless we get wet heavy snow or freezing rain the show will last until I attack the garden with my weed whacker and petrol powered head shears in March. These amazing feats of gardening are accomplished by using reliable, care-free perennials, principally ornamental grass with the dominant genus being Miscanthus.

I developed an interest in ornamental grasses early in my career, growing up in England I was always amazed at the large clump of *Cortaderia selloana* that put forth with such exuberance each year in the neglected garden in the farmyard. I remember my father burning it to the ground every spring thinking he was trying to rid the garden of this pest but weeks later it would rebound with the freshest sprigs of green in the garden. It was the only



*Cortaderia selloana*



time my father spent in the garden, the farm chores and family demanded all of his time. To my amazement this clump of Pampas Grass towered towards the heavens by late summer thriving on total neglect. I was hooked on ornamental grass in the garden.

It wasn't until I had finished my formal training in horticulture that I had the opportunity to experience the use of ornamental grass once more. I was hooked once again but now it would be the bane of my professional career, since they were care free and provided a full season of interest, I could not but use them at every opportunity. Of course living in town I cannot torch them each spring like my father did, they demand a little more effort but a petrol powered head shear makes quick work of them just the same.

My favourite is *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Variegatus', the Variegated Silver Grass. The heavy white edges of the leaves in-filled with light grey-blue-green lend this plant a regal appearance as it graces the front approach to my house. As with most of the *Miscanthus* species and cultivars, it is a reliable clump former and dispels the myth about not using ornamental grass because they are invasive. If I was to encourage a first-timer to plant ornamental grass this would be my first recommendation.



*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Variegatus'

*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Strictus' is equally as regal and although the yellow variegations go across the leaves, giving the appearance of large dots, it still retains a degree of formality. 'Strictus' seems to bloom a little more freely than 'Variegatus' and, as such, has an added dimension to the late summer garden.

According to Rick Darke in his book *The Color Encyclopaedia of Ornamental Grasses*, he states that *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' is "Arguably the best all-round garden plant of all the *Miscanthus* species and cultivars." I seem to have too many favourites to even attempt to decide which is the best, however I will agree that 'Morning Light' Silver Grass is an outstanding plant. It's slender, narrow strap like leaves weep to the ground



*Miscanthus floridulus*

producing a finely dissected rounded clump. I have seen this particular cultivar used to full effect placed in a planter at the entrance to a large home.

*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio' is one of those charming plants that endears itself to the gardener because of its diminutive form. It is half the size of the cultivars previously mentioned yet seems to retain all of their desirable attributes. Like 'Morning Light' it has finely dissected foliage and droops to the ground. It also produces a stunning show of flowers in late summer.

Everyone should try at least one *Miscanthus*, even for the small urban gardens there are the dwarf species such as 'Little Dot'. They require no care and, as my own garden is testament, seem to thrive on neglect. Their only requirement is a good brush cut in early spring, an occasional feed when the mood behoves you and, ofcourse, generous doses of admiration.

#### Recommended Readings

Darke, Rick. 1999. *The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses*. Portland: Timber Press

Darke, Rick. 1994. *Manual of Grasses*. London: Macmillan Press

Oudolf, Piet. 1998. *Gardening with Grasses*. London: Francis Lincoln Limited

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