

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Discover the benefits of these lovely ornamental grasses

AFTER five years of writing a small column for *The Argus*, welcome to the first of a weekly full-page version of my garden diary.

Whether you have a coastal garden like me, or a more conventional plot, the use of ornamental grasses can play a significant part in your planting schemes.

Not only can they provide a calming accompaniment to the more colourful flowering plants you might desire, they can also be the sole focus of your creation.

There are many to choose from and many perform well in containers too.

Lots of them will also tolerate a wide range of conditions, which is especially fortunate in my coastal plot, but most do like a sunny position.

A bonus for most gardeners too, they do not need much feeding.

Here are a few of the favourites I have come to love in my own garden.

Luzula Nivea Snowy Woodrush is a slow-spreading, evergreen perennial that forms loose clumps of rough, deep green leaves. In early and midsummer these sprays of pure white, tuft-like flowers appear that last for several weeks and it works really well in this shaded gravel bed in the back garden but would work equally as well planted in among some colour too.

Another stunning grass growing on the central path in my garden is *Hakonechloa macra Aureola*. It's a clump-forming compact deciduous perennial grass, suitable for growing in borders or containers. It grows well in sun or shade and its colour will vary according to the light conditions. In the shade, the leaves take on a lime green colour and in full sun a creamy gold with reddish pink tints in autumn. I've had it now for several years and it never disappoints.

A few years ago, I was given a grass and found it to be *Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* or gardener's garters. It's a vigorous perennial grass forming an extensive colony of erect stems to 60cm tall, bearing narrow leaves boldly striped with white, pale and dark green, and narrow pale green flowering

panicles in summer. It can go a bit wild, but in my beach garden, this is exactly what I wanted as it copes so well with the strong winds we get here on the coast. It also looks amazing growing up through the gravel and with this *verbena* *polaris* poking through.

Carex testacea is a really lovely grass for the border, container or gravel bed. From spring to autumn the pale olive-green leaves of this ornamental grass turn a warm coppery orange. In midsummer it bears small, brown flower spikes. I've got two clumps, one in the beach garden and a specimen one in a container.

Miscanthus sinensis Morning Light is a lovely grass that would work equally well in the border or as here in the beach gravel garden at Driftwood. It is a compact deciduous perennial with narrow leaves finely edged with white, and pink-tinged panicles of flowers in autumn. It gives some height to the planting too.

Finally, without doubt, my favourite grass of all is the incredibly tactile *Stipa tenuissima* or Mexican feather grass, also called pony tail grass. It is so nice to have it close to the path so its arching, folded or rolled, linear leaves and narrow panicles can caress you as you brush past it. If you've not tried these lovely grasses why not give them a go in your garden this summer?

The National Garden Scheme has some wonderful gardens to visit right across Sussex.

Throughout the open garden season, usually February through to late September, I'll suggest a few that readers may like to visit and in so doing, support nursing and caring charities as well.

This weekend you can go and see Town Place in Ketches Lane, Freshfield near Sheffield Park. It opens both this Sunday, July 3, and next Sunday, July 10, from 2pm to 5pm. Admission is £7.50 and children go free.

You can also contact them and arrange a visit "by appointment" all this month as well.

It is a stunning three-acre garden with a growing international reputation for the quality of its design, planting and gardening. The garden is set around a 17th



Top row from left: *Phalaris*, *Miscanthus*, *Hakonechloa*. Above, Geoff at work in the garden and, right, pony tail grass

century Sussex farmhouse and has over 800 assorted roses, many herbaceous borders, a herb garden, not to mention the topiary, inspired by the sculptures of Henry Moore.

Here too, you can find a selection of ornamental grasses throughout the garden. An 800-year old oak dominates too. Certainly not to be missed.

You can read more about my garden in Seaford at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or come and visit.

It is open by arrangement throughout July with money raised going to Macmillan Cancer Support, for which I have raised almost £100,000 in recent years.

