



*Cortaderia Selloana pumila*, the dwarf Pampas Grass at Kew

Answers to gardening questions

# Most important of plants

By R. W. Sidwell

The grasses are the most important family of plants known to man.

This sweeping statement might, at first glance, seem to require justification. But when one considers that maize, rice and the many lesser cereals provide the staple diet of all the main races of mankind and that grassland provides the main food for the most important domesticated animals, it will be seen to be true.

We may add many other grasses of importance. Sugar cane supplies most of the world's sugar, bamboos have an important part in the economy of the Far East; one could go on indefinitely. Even in ornamental gardening, which is our present subject, the area occupied by grasses exceeds that of all other plants. Lawns are larger than flower beds.

It is, however, not with any of these things that we are concerned at the moment but with the use of grass species as ordinary ornamental plants. Grasses have a special little niche here, for they can give textures and characters that cannot be provided by other plants.

For a bold specimen plant we have the pampas grass (*Cortaderia Selloana*) in its several varieties. The tallest I know is "Sunningdale Silver" which with me, on rich moist soil, reaches 10ft in height and is apt to break down in rough weather. On poorer soil it will stay upright. Of very different character is the variety *Pumila* which is no more than half that height, with thick stems and large plumes standing stiffly erect under the worse weather. It is a pity that this variety is not more widely available.

The rough saw edges to the leaves of pampas grass make tidying up an uncomfortable job. Some people just set fire to them once a year, a practice I do not like, but the plant survives.

Another giant is *Arundo donax* with leafy stems to a height of 10ft. It should be planted in a sheltered spot and is obviously suited to the larger gardens.

One of the best grasses for the mixed border is *Miscanthus sinensis variegatus* which will reach a height of about 4ft. It may bear insignificant flower plumes at the end of a hot summer but its great merit is its striped variegated foliage, which is almost evergreen. It is a clump-forming non-invasive plant and thus differs markedly from the common variegated "gardener's garters" (*Phalaris arundinacea*) which is strongly invasive and turns brown early in the autumn.

A truly evergreen grass, as its name implies, is *Helictotrichon sempervirens*. This makes a specimen clump of blue-grey foliage with slender 4ft flowering stems rising well above it. It is best given some degree of isolation if it is to display its graceful form properly. It looks particularly well surrounded by really low-growing plants.

Of similar foliage colour but under 6in high is *Festuca ovina glauca* which is popular as an edging plant and also looks well in groups with the smaller spring-flowering bulbs, especially dwarf daffodils, planted between the clumps.

The golden form of meadow foxtail (*Alopecurus pratensis aurea*) is a pleasant grass near the front of the border. A little trimming is necessary to keep it tidy but its bright foliage colour is quite distinct and very welcome in early summer.

An attractive little grass that I have now lost, alas, is *Bouteloua oligostachya* the Mosquito Grass, which has unimpressive basal leaves from which arise 18in stems bearing coppery bronze horizontal spikelets about 2in long looking very like railway signals. It is a weak grower and is apt to die out in winter, partly through dessication after being lifted by winter frost. The name Mosquito Grass comes from the North American tribe of Indians, not from the insect. Both plant and tribe inhabit the same area.

There are, of course, many annual grasses of value for garden decora-

tion and for dry flower arrangements. Hare's tail grass (*Lagurus ovatus*) is well-named except that the spikes are smaller than implied. Baby bunny tail grass would seem to be more descriptive. *Briza maxima*, the quaking grass is popular and other annuals worth growing are *Rhynchelytrum repens* formerly known as *Tricholaena rosea*, and still often sold under that name. This plant is really a short-lived, rather tender, perennial but is best treated as an annual.

Other annual grasses worth growing are *Eragrostis elegans*, several species of pennisetum and the rather coarse *Coix lachryma*.

After all that, we have still not mentioned bamboos, the only woody, shrubby grasses, and in the eyes of modern garden designers perhaps the most important of all. They will require an article to themselves at a later date.