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with David Kuack

John Greenlee on ornamental grasses

The No. 1 garden product in America is turf. But grass aficionado John Greenlee wants to change that situation by increasing use and demand for ornamental grasses. Here he discusses misconceptions about ornamental grasses and their potential to change how growers market them and how consumers use them.

Q. What's the biggest misconception growers have about ornamental grasses?

A. The big misconception is that grasses grow the same from one region to another. The most important challenge growers have is understanding how a particular grass will grow for them and how it grows for their customers. Identify the grasses that grow best in your region.

To be successful, you must understand the regional issues surrounding the grasses you grow. For example, many *Pennisetum alopecuroides* varieties require a winter chill, or vernalization, to bloom and thrive.

Q. What's the biggest misconception retailers have about selling/marketing ornamental grasses?

A. The biggest misconception is that the 'grass phenomenon' has peaked. I am convinced it has just begun.

The No. 1 garden product in America is turf. Ornamental grasses are going to bite into this market in a big way. Grasses have now expanded into groundcovers and meadow markets. The American lawn is going to change and ornamental grasses are going to fuel that change.

Retailers need to understand that grasses are part of every ecosystem. There are grasses for sun, shade, wet, dry, flowering accent, fall color and more.

Retailers need to position grasses throughout their stores — don't just throw them together in 'grass ghettos.' Remember that grasses are still relatively new to Jane Q. Public, so learn to associate grasses with plants people know. Carex with hosta, penisetum with daylily and so on.

Q. What recommendations do you have for a grower interested in starting to produce ornamental grasses?

A. Getting started means understanding how grasses grow in your area. You must understand your market.

You'd better know what grows well in your area. For example, blue fescue is a fall/winter plant in the Deep South. By early spring it resembles dry wheat toast, but it makes a fine winter annual.

Are you in a city or dense metropolitan area? Then maybe you should focus on varieties that are more compact and shade tolerant. Avoid big, sharp grasses. Find out what grows well in the markets you intend to sell to, then grow every grass available in seed or from plugs and divide them as needed to deliver to market a handsome finished product.

Combinations are a good idea, too. You will find that mixing color and texture in 2- to 5-gallon containers makes for an attractive display and creates ready-to-go items for consumers.

such a lawn that needs mowing only twice a year? I do.

Surely grasses will find increased use in containers. EuroAmerican's Fall Magic program is proof that grasses belong in container gardening and the landscaping use of grasses has been growing steadily every year.

The hot Southern states, the West and Southwest are particularly primed for growth as it has taken time for the ornamental grass industry to find suitable grasses for these climates. The first ornamental grasses commercially available didn't grow well in Florida, Texas or California. Now there are all kinds of grasses for these climates.

Q. Is there a concern that some grasses sold commercially could become invasive?

A. There are no easy answers regarding the issue of invasive grasses. However, growers and retailers would be well served to pay attention to this complex problem. If growers and retailers are irresponsible, the same 'brush' of invasive grasses will tar many good, noninvasive grasses. This problem only underscores the need for regional awareness concerning invasive species.

Many grasses can be invasive in one climate and perfectly benign in another climate or region. This fact underscores the desirability of regionally native grasses. If we don't police ourselves as an industry, the government will. And that means when penisetums are outlawed, only outlaws will have penisetums.

Q. What criteria did you use for choosing the ornamental grasses in EuroAmerican Propagators' John Greenlee Signature Collection?

A. The John Greenlee Collection is a wide range of materials

Greenlee Collection features popular grasses

The John Greenlee Signature Collection of grasses is available from EuroAmerican Propagators in Bonsall, Calif. The collection will initially contain 14 varieties and will expand to 28 grasses by spring 2002. EuroAmerican has exclusive rights to propagate and distribute Greenlee's newest varieties along with some popular, well-known varieties. Future additions include grasslike plants such as phormium and liriope.

◆ For more: EuroAmerican Propagators, P.O. Box 289, Bonsall, CA 92003-0289; (760) 731-6029; fax (760) 731-3054; www.euroamprop.com.

