

GROWERTALKS

Growing With Griffin

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Make More Green with Ornamental Grasses

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If your ideas about ornamental grasses start and end with Purple Fountain Grass, a whole other world is out there just waiting for you to explore it! And it's not too late: There's still time to produce and use ornamental grasses for your late summer and fall programs.

Consider first how you plan to incorporate ornamental grasses into your production plans, then work to create your orders. At this point in the year, for fall sales for monoculture pots, I suggest ordering the largest size you can find (bareroot or 30-/36-cell liners, for example) that'll work economically in the pot of your choice. If you're looking to make some fantastic-looking fall mixed containers, certainly a smaller liner will probably fit the bill.

You can have a full perennial (and annual) program of ornamental grasses alone—many savvy growers and garden centers do. Consider expanding your grasses palette for both monoculture and mixed containers. Just because a plant is considered perennial doesn't preclude it from use in mixed containers or being treated like an annual. Recent market research indicates that consumers often don't care as much about "perennial" and "annual" designations as we think they do, so don't let those words limit your creativity.

Need a "thriller" for the center of a mixed container? Below are some fantastic options. They may or may not flower in containers, but they'll add texture, movement and color interest as the seasons change, and the plants change with the seasons. (Don't forget: They probably won't reach their maximum height in one season, especially when used in mixed containers.)

Some suggestions*:

- **Miscanthus Adagio:** 4- to 5-ft. tall with narrow, arching green foliage; perfect for large containers
- **Miscanthus Bandwidth:** 2- to 3-ft. tall with wonderful striped leaves; infertile, so no seed set
- **Miscanthus Morning Light:** 3- to 5-ft. tall with fine foliage and a wonderful arching form
- **Panicum Hot Rod:** 36- to 40-in. tall; a red switch grass that turns red earlier than other panicum



Pictured: **Panicum Hot Rod**, Photo: Emerald Coast Growers. **Miscanthus Morning Light**, Photo: Walters Gardens. **Miscanthus Morning Light**, Photo: Emerald Coast Growers.

What's a "thriller" without a "spiller"? Try carex or hakonechloa to fill this role in your star containers. While many of these grasses are best used in part or full shade, they're anything but dull.

- **Carex Evergold**: 12-in. tall with narrow, creamy yellow leaves with dark green edges
- **Carex Banana Boat**: 6- to 12-in. tall; showy with broad leaves of lemon to banana yellow with green stripes
- **Hakonechloa All Gold**: 9- to 14-in. tall with lovely, cascading leaves of gold; a bit more upright than others
- **Hakonechloa Aureola**: 14- to 18-in. tall; green-and-yellow variegated leaves with cascading habit; Perennial Plant Association's Perennial Plant of the Year for 2009. (I suggest making this endorsement known if you have retail customers.)



Pictured: **Carex Banana Boat**, Photo: Walters Gardens. **Carex Evergold**, Photo: Walters Gardens. **Hakonechloa Aureola**, Photo: Walters Gardens.

These mixed with other perennials (beautiful heuchera or sedum, anyone?) or annuals will make your mixed containers POP this year!

While you're considering what to change or resolve for 2019-2020, consider installing a semi- to permanent garden at your store to show your customers how to use the varieties on your retail benches. Make sure your employees are trained to point out specific plants in the display and talk about them, too. Consumers can't always visualize how the plants on your benches will look in their gardens, so your employees' ability to help connect those dots can dramatically boost your sales.

I also highly recommend creating some dramatic, decorative mixed containers to spark your customers' imaginations about what they might create themselves. Plan on having some ready-made, downscale pots that will just fit into your customers' carts on the way to your checkout.

If you offer classes in creating mixed containers, don't forget to add a few grasses to the input options your customers can choose from. You may help them discover a new group of plants they can't live without! **GT**

**You'll need to be aware of any restrictions for your state that may exist. For example, many miscanthus are banned in New York, but a few exceptions exist to these rules. Check in with your state regulatory department; one example for New York: www.dec.ny.gov/animals/99141.html.*

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