

Thirty-year Anniversary of the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum Grass Collection  
1987-2017

Mary H. Meyer, professor and extension horticulturist, U of MN

***History and Background***

In the spring of 1987, Peter Olin, Arboretum Director, approved the addition of an ornamental grass collection at the Arboretum, using the ground cover area near the Lyman Arbor overlooking the azalea allee. Dr. Harold Pellett, professor and international award-winning plant breeder, funded the project, which was initiated by University of Minnesota (U of M) horticultural science graduate student Mary Meyer. In 1987, almost no grasses were for sale in Minnesota garden centers, even large wholesale growers Bailey's and Bachmans were not comfortable selling plants thought to be non-hardy in zone 4. Additionally, one tough (and winter hardy) rhizomatous grass, ribbon grass, had given all grasses a bad name, since everyone thought ALL grasses had problematic invasive rhizomes that would invade any landscape.

In 1986, the U of M selected Oehme Van Sweden, a new distinctive landscape architectural firm, from Washington, DC to use its 'American style' of landscape design featuring large drifts of grasses around the Northrup Auditorium on the Minneapolis campus. With no Minnesota growers selling grasses, Oehme Van Sweden transported plants from Baltimore, Maryland to complete the project. Seeing this, Meyer realized the need to test grasses in Minnesota's harsh climate. She met with Peter Olin and Harold Pellett and they agreed to start a grass collection to test the winter hardiness in Minnesota as part of her graduate work.

Janet Sinner was head of the grounds staff in 1987 and worked with Meyer along with Ken Vogel, dedicated staff, volunteer and Arb donor, and together they planted nearly 100 different grasses, native and non-native, in 1987 and 1988. Because of the fear of invasive rhizomes, some plants were planted in huge plastic tubs that were sunk into the ground. Even worse, "new" landscape fiber or mat was rolled out to cover the soil hoping to control weeds and reduce labor. Thirty years later, staff is still removing that fabric, which did not prevent weeds and restricted root growth creating an impervious barrier and poor growth.

In 1991, the Minnesota Nursery and Landscape Association newsletter published *Ten Ornamental Grasses for Minnesota*, the first results from the field work in the Collection, which encouraged wholesale and retail growers to begin producing and selling grasses. In 1995, the first edition of *Ornamental Grasses for Cold Climates* was published, and since has been revised in 2004 and 2012. The latest edition is available from the Arboretum Gift & Garden Store.

In 2006, Blue Heaven®, an upright selection of native little bluestem, was patented by the University and introduced in the trade. To date, six U of M graduate students have received advanced degrees related to the collection. More than 70 publications have resulted from work in the collection, the most recent being the national

switchgrass and little bluestem trials. In 2012, the Grass Collection was accredited as part of the Plant Collection Network, with the American Public Garden Association, a national designation of value and management excellence.

### ***Trends in Growing Grasses***

Trends in grass gardening have changed in 30 years! In the 1980s, grasses were often planted in a separate grouping, a grass garden, and were just beginning to be planted with other flowering perennials. Native grasses are much more popular today than they were in 1980. Many cultivars or improved forms of native grasses are available now that were unknown in 1987. Today, grasses are much more widely planted in public settings, such as rain gardens, boulevard gardens and in commercial parking lots. Grasses are important components of green infrastructure in bioswales and green roofs. Many garden centers in Minnesota now sell grasses, unlike 1987! Nationally, grass sales have increased from \$61 million in 2003 (first year of reporting grass sales by the National Ag Statistics Service) to \$158 million in 2014.

### ***Visiting the Arboretum's Grass Collection***

Fall is a beautiful time of year to visit the grass collection, many of the warm season grasses are in full flower and at their peak. Fall color is another reason to visit in September or October. To see the sedges bloom, you need to visit in April and May! If you come in June and July the featherreed grass is at its peak; and in the winter, you can see which grasses stand up with the snow! Year round you are invited to enjoy the grass collection at the Arboretum on your own.

### ***2017 Grass Collection Events and Programs***

In June, the [Master Gardener](#) State Conference June 23-24, 2017 will tour the Grass Collection and learn which grasses are best for difficult sites and have proved the hardiest in Minnesota.

Also in June we will be distributing a new **Native Grass Poster** that showcases the [benefits of native grasses](#) along with native Lepidoptera they support.

**Public Open Houses** will be held in the Grass Collection on Thursday, Aug. 24, 2017 from 4-8 p.m. and Tuesday, Oct. 10 from 2-6 p.m. Walk the Collection with Dr. Mary Meyer and pick your favorite grass, get a copy of the new grass poster and enjoy the summer and fall in Minnesota.

Take a [Grass Class](#) and learn the best grasses for Minnesota gardens on Sat, Oct. 28, 2017 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m. at the Arboretum.

Throughout the year articles will be published on the grasses in the Arboretum News, and the University of Minnesota [Extension Yard and Garden Newsletter](#), and [Benefits of Native Grasses website](#). A new article: *Grasses 30 Special Features and Uses* will also be published and online in June 2017.