

Successful Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

JC Raulston Arboretum Plant Focus

Pink Muhlygrass Prized for Ornamental Display

Helping Carolinians Increase Their Knowledge of Gardening, Manage Their Landscape Investment & Protect the Environment

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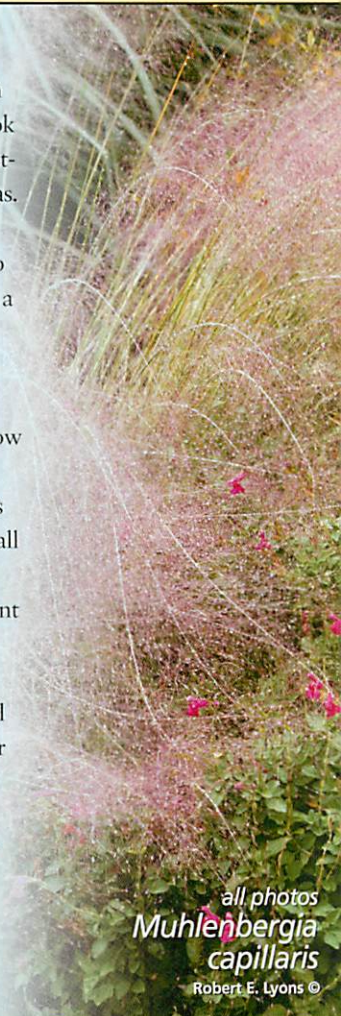
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Considered by many to be one of the most beautiful ornamental grasses, *Muhlenbergia capillaris*, or pink muhlygrass, as it is commonly known in North Carolina, is prized for the fall show it creates. With flowers that look like a purple cloud from afar, this knee-high grass is a native that occurs in eastern North America from Kansas to Massachusetts and south to Florida and Texas.

Given this wide range of adaptation, pink muhlygrass thrives in many environments, from wet prairies and dry savannas, at the outer edges of marshes, to well-drained upland pine forests. It performs best in full sun. Once established, a dense stand is remarkable in the late summer and fall when the silky, wispy, purplish-pink panicles of bloom appear almost overnight. Each panicle is 12 to 18 inches long, and up to 10 inches wide, standing tall above the wiry leaves. The color persists for 6 to 8 weeks, or until frost, when the ripe seeds that follow give an attractive tan color to the wispy plumes.

The most striking way to plant muhlygrass is in clumps. Each plant consists of wire-like stems that originate from a basal clump and will get up to 3 feet tall and just as wide. Plant muhlygrass in borders and perennial gardens where a fine-textured foliage is desired to accent bolder specimens. It makes an excellent groundcover for areas with poor soils, or use as a refined specimen grass in natural gardens. It is easy to start from seed and easily can be divided to start new plants. Unlike some of the non-native ornamental grasses, muhlygrass will not displace other native plants and grasses. Leave the plant in the garden over the winter for interest and cut it back to around 6 to 8 inches before new growth in the spring.

The prominence of muhlygrass at the JC Raulston Arboretum lies squarely in the striking perennial border. From a distance, this grass complements surrounding plants. Up close, its fine texture and bold mass can really be appreciated when in full flower. *Royce Hardin*



all photos
Muhlenbergia capillaris
Robert E. Lyons ©

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Select Best Grass for Your Region

Lawn care can easily become a burden in terms of the time required to maintain that beautiful green around your house. However, you can reap the rewards of a handsome lawn by taking great care in selecting the type of grass you wish to grow. With proper choices, a durable lawn will grow with minimal maintenance and pesticide use.

What to plant? No one type of grass is best suited to all situations. You'll need to consider a number of factors before deciding which grass to plant. Base your decision on region, climate, intended use or wear at the site and desired appearance. Both cool-season and warm-season grasses are grown in North Carolina. Here is a highlight of the choices for our state's regions.

Cool-Season Grasses

Cool-season grasses, including the turf-type tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue, grow best in the piedmont and western regions of the state, and it's best to grow a combination of these as a blended mix. For example, Kentucky bluegrass grows well in other parts of the country but doesn't perform well in our heat. It's best used as part of a blend that includes several cultivars of tall fescue.

Cool-season grasses look their best in the spring and fall. They stay reasonably green in the winter but will go dormant in summer if they aren't watered. Nevertheless, you will have green color in the lawn practically all year long. Tall fescue blends

are moderate- to coarse-bladed, heavy-duty grasses that tolerate clay soils and have better shade tolerance than most other turf. Tall fescue has few serious pest problems but is subject to brown patch disease under warm, wet conditions. It is a bunchgrass that does not recover well from injury and thus must be reseeded if bare areas appear; reseeding is best done in the fall.

Warm-Season Grasses

If you live in the coastal plains, have sandy soils or do not wish to irrigate, you may find that a warm-season grass such as centipede, Bermudagrass or zoysiagrass may better suit your needs. Warm-season grasses are slow to green up in the spring, grow best in the summer, then turn brown and go dormant after the first heavy frost. Once these grasses are established, they are extremely drought tolerant and thus will save money on irrigation and reseeding.

Centipedegrass is a slow-growing, apple-green, coarse-leafed, warm-seasoned turfgrass that is adapted for use as a low maintenance, general purpose turf. It requires little fertilizer, infrequent mowing and grows well in full sun to moderate shade. It does not tolerate traffic, compaction or heavy shade.

Zoysiagrass is a very low, slow-growing grass that makes a very dense, wear-resistant lawn. This type of turf forms the most luxurious type of grass that money

see **Select Best Grass** on page 3 ▶

Landscaping Payoffs

Stately trees, glorious flowers, ornamental shrubs and lush, thick grass can be a source of pride and joy for homeowners and others. Luckily, for all of us, this isn't a superficial beauty. This beauty provides numerous benefits for everyone since the value of landscaping extends beyond our own property boundaries. Landscaping greatly enhances our communities in terms of the economic and environmental benefits it provides. Consider this:

- Landscaping increases the value of a home by an average of 15 percent and reduces the time a home is on the market by 5 to 6 weeks.
- Landscaping helps cool our environment. Well-placed plantings and turf can reduce air conditioning costs by 15 to 35 percent.
- Landscaping helps restore habitats for birds, butterflies and other animals that could not survive without flowers, trees and shrubs.
- Landscaping buffers and reduces unwanted noise.
- Landscaping reduces the effects of air pollution. Trees and turf improve air quality by removing carbon dioxide and other pollutant gases from the air.
- Landscaping reduces nonpoint source water pollution, the greatest

threat to water quality. Healthy lawns reduce stormwater runoff.

- Landscaping boosts our state and local economies. The Green Industry Council estimates the total economic value of the green industry to North Carolina is more than 7 billion dollars with total employment approaching 200,000 people.

The North Carolina Green Industry Council and North Carolina Cooperative Extension work together to educate the public on the value of sound horticultural practices to protect the environment and increase the economic benefits to individuals and communities. Through a statewide campaign, "Planting for Our Tomorrows," the Green Industry Council also works with various communities on special landscaping projects. To learn more, visit www.ncgreenindustrycouncil.org.





When should I put out preemergent herbicides?

Because preemergent herbicides work by preventing weed seeds from germinating, it is necessary to apply a preemergent herbicide before weeds germinate.

The most common annual weed that requires preemergent products is crabgrass, which germinates when air temperatures reach 65 to 70 degrees for four consecutive days. On average, this happens around March 1 for the coast and March 15 to 30 for the piedmont and mountains.

When applying preemergent herbicides to winter annual weeds that germinate in the fall, night temperatures should fall to

around 55 to 60 degrees for four consecutive nights. This will occur around September 15 to October 1 for the coast and September 1 to 15 for the piedmont and mountains.

These herbicides are effective for 6 to 12 weeks, depending on the product. When season-long control is needed, make a second application about nine weeks after the first.

Some of these herbicides can be very damaging to newly sown lawns. Before applying to a new lawn, read the product label to see if the active ingredient will be safe for young plants. As always, read the directions carefully before using any pesticide.

Donna Teasley

Select Best Grass

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Robert E. Lyons ©

can buy. Zoysiagrass grows well in full sun or partial shade. It is very slow to establish when plugged and slow to recover from injury. Zoysia is well adapted to the piedmont and coastal plain and is usually vegetatively planted, although procedures are now available for seeding common zoysiagrass.

Bermudagrass varieties are typically fine in texture and grow low and dense. They are very drought tolerant, require full sunlight and grow well on all but poorly drained soils. Bermudas withstand wear and traffic, establish quickly and recover rapidly from injury. This grass can invade flowerbeds and other areas where it is not wanted because it has a strong above- and below-ground stem system. Learn more at www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/.

Carl Matyac

ENVIRO-TIP

Protect Water Quality With These Practices

Water quality is important to all citizens in North Carolina, and most of us can take steps to help ensure that our lakes, streams and groundwater won't suffer from careless practices around our homes. Nitrogen and phosphorus, essential nutrients for a healthy landscape, can degrade water if they aren't used properly. Too much of these nutrients can promote the growth of undesirable aquatic weeds such as algae. By implementing Best Management Practices (BMPs) we can maintain turfgrass and reduce negative impacts on the environment.

Use These Best Management Practices

Test your soil and follow soil test recommendations to promote ideal plant growth. Healthy plants can resist stress and pests. Use soil test to determine amount of phosphorus and nitrogen needed. Generally, the best time to apply phosphorus is in the fall after coring and seeding. Apply nitrogen only when the grass is actively growing and use slow-release

nitrogen sources to reduce leaching and runoff.

Always sweep or blow fertilizer and grass clippings from streets, sidewalks and other impervious surfaces back onto lawn. Stormwater will carry nutrients and pesticides directly into surface water.

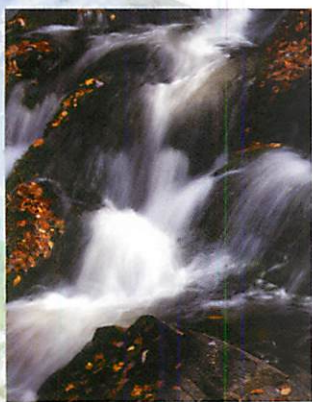
Recycle grass clippings back into the turf. Grasscycling reduces nitrogen needs and does not contribute to thatch.

Scout for pest problems and apply pesticides only when needed.

Perform cultural practices such as fertilization and overseeding at the proper time. Lawn maintenance calendars for the major turfgrasses used in North Carolina can be found at www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/.

Learn more at one of the many Extension's Successful Gardener seminars around the state this spring (see www.successfulgardener.org) or call your county Cooperative Extension Center.

Jim Monroe



gardentalk



"Flowers and plants are silent presences; they nourish every sense except the ear."

May Sarton



Zombie Waterlily Tulip
Robert E. Lyons ©

Garden Spot

Extension's **Successful Gardener Learning Centers** are one of the features of the Southern Spring Home & Garden Show in Charlotte and the Southern Ideal Home Show in Greensboro in March and in Raleigh in April. N.C. Cooperative Extension horticulture agents and Master Gardeners will host the Learning Centers and will answer your gardening questions.

Extension's **Successful Gardener Learning Center**
March 2-6, Charlotte Merchandise Mart
March 11-13, Greensboro Coliseum
April 8-10, State Fairgrounds, Raleigh

Extension's **Successful Gardener Seminars**
March 4, Charlotte Merchandise Mart
March 12, Greensboro Coliseum,
 co-sponsored by Carolina Gardener Magazine

Details:
www.successfulgardener.org
 or
www.southernshows.com

Gardening in March

Lawns

- Apply preemergent herbicides, if they were not applied in late February. Apply prior to the dogwood bloom.
- Mow lawn as grass begins to green up.
- Spot treat cool-weather annual weeds such as chickweed and henbit with a broadleaf herbicide.

Ornamentals

- Plant containerized roses between March and May.
- Pruning can begin now on evergreen shrubs as well as on deciduous spring-flowering shrubs, such as quince, spirea and forsythia, after flowers fade.
 - Do not prune spring-blooming shrubs, such as azaleas and Indian hawthorns, that haven't bloomed yet.
 - Heavy pruning and rejuvenation pruning of summer-blooming shrubs can be done now.
 - Apply bulb fertilizers according to label directions after bulbs emerge. Wait until April to fertilize other ornamentals.
 - Check for tea scale on camellias, scale on euonymus and spider mites on juniper.
 - Begin rose spray program to keep down disease and insect infestations.
 - Plant a tree for Arbor Day! Arbor Day is always the first Friday after March 15.

Edibles

- Prune rabbiteye blueberry bushes.
- If you have not already fertilized pecans, do so now.
- Grow cool-season crops in both the spring and fall. Cabbage, lettuce, leafy greens, beets, broccoli, cauliflower, collards, Irish potatoes, radishes, rutabagas and turnips are cool-season crops. Transplant or seed about mid-March in the piedmont, 2 to 3 weeks earlier in eastern North Carolina and 2 to 3 weeks later in western North Carolina.

David Barkley

TOP AWARDS RECEIVED FROM:

- ▶ North Carolina State Grange/Extension Foundation
- ▶ Garden Writers Association
- ▶ International Association of Business Communicators
- ▶ N.C. & National Associations of County Agricultural Agents
- ▶ Southern Extension Forest Resource Specialists
- ▶ Mecklenburg County Priority Awards

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