



## Autumn's Wave

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



I must say a most peculiar, at least from my design standards, planting exists on the UConn campus. Broad-leaved rhododendrons are paired with, of all else, ornamental grasses. Amazingly, it works well!

Grasses with their feathery seed heads are synonymous with fall. Who can't remember the soft rustling blades of grass as we crossed the fields of our youth? How many hours I spent sharing secrets with my best friend atop a craggy boulder overlooking acres of green turning to buff meadow, sadly now, a subdivision.

As luring as grass species may be, I've spent years keeping such marauders as crabgrass, quackgrass and even bluegrass (which always seems to better in the garden beds than in the lawn areas) at bay. Needless to say, the concept of ornamental grasses in perennial beds was slow to sink in.

While I still can't quite give into the temptation to plant the beautiful white and green gardener's garters, *Phalaris arundinacea picta*, (beware of any grass labeled robust!) in my white garden, I'm enjoying several of the better behaved ornamental grasses.

Fountain grass, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, ranks number one in my book. I have it interplanted with pink coneflowers backed by purple butterfly bush. Long flowing blades

cascade gracefully so the grass is only 12 to 18 inches tall when not in bloom. Late summer heralds the soft, bristly inflorescences lasting into winter. This midsize grass integrates well with flowering perennials and bulbs like alliums. I especially like it because it was easy to start from seed and I haven't had to divide it even after 10 years.

When looking for a golden touch to the landscape, think 'All Gold' Japanese hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra*). This plant has a graceful cascading habit and only gets about 6 to 10 inches tall with a mounded habit and slow spread, at least where I have it. Grow it in either full sun or part shade.

For shaded areas, explore the sedge family. 'Bowles Golden', *Carex stricta*, appears as dappled sunlight beneath a wooded canopy. White and green 'Ice Dance' steps lively along a path in my white garden. There are a number of other variegated sedges as well as the mysterious black sedge aptly named for its black colored flower stalks.

Japanese blood grass foliage is green at the base, and then, a few inches up turns a striking red. Color is more intense in sunny areas. Cute blue fescues form small, fine-leaved tufts. These well behaved grasses require full sun. Quaking grass, *Briza media*, prefers poor soil. It is best known for its panicles of heart-shaped, plump, dangling seed heads used widely in dried arrangements.

Do consider some of our native warm season grasses as well. A favorite of many is little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) with its upright growth habit and fine-textured foliage. The blue hued stems turn a reddish color in the fall with tufts of white seeds sought after by wildlife.

The list of ornamental grasses goes on and on. A number of good reference books and websites are available to help you make your selections. When developing new plantings or renovating older beds, consider ornamental grasses for their texture, movement and soft, rustling sounds as they dance with the wind. For questions pertaining to ornamental grasses or any other gardening question, call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-4274 or visit us at [www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu).