



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

## There's More to Grass than Turf

Not so many years ago, gardeners worked hard to attain the perfect carpet of turf grass.

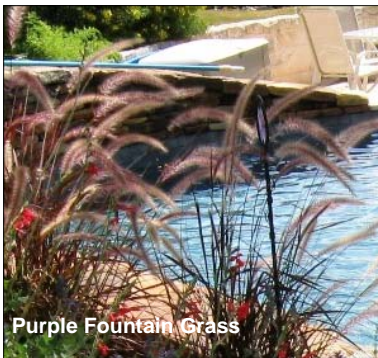
This practice is changing. With a new emphasis on water conservation punctuated by severe shortages of water and rationing, more people are reluctant to maintain a vast outdoor carpet. The trend is toward removing St. Augustine and bermuda expanses and putting in drought-tolerant decorative grasses, cacti, and hardy blooming plants to save water, time and money.

Done thoughtfully, the replacement of turf grass can add interest to the area around a home. But taking out the lawn carpet and putting in new landscape plants does not mean going grass-free. Here are few decorative grasses that do well in this area.

**Cedar sedge**, *Carex planostachys* (right). Although a sedge is not a true grass, this looks like a grass. Cedar sedge has thin leaves and tolerates mowing and foot traffic.



**Purple Fountain grass**, *Pennisetum setaceum 'Rubrum'* (left). This is a favorite



of many gardeners because of its color and growing ease. It will grow in sun or partial sun, and its water needs are average. It has two drawbacks, however. It can be aggressive and it is an annual unless you live in hardiness zones 9 and up, so it's a little iffy for parts of the Hill Country.

**Dwarf Fountain grass**, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*. This deciduous non-native gets about 3 feet tall and puts out pretty white spikes. It may not be as cold-hardy as you want it to be, and it will require a drink during prolonged dry spells. With purple fountain grass as a backdrop, it puts

on a show.

**Gulf muhly**, *Muhlenbergia capillaries* (right). This Central Texas native varies from 1 to 3 feet high. It likes sun to part shade, has low to average water requirements, and attracts butterflies. Additionally, its fall colors make the air around it look pink.



**Mexican Feathergrass** (Wiregrass), *Nassella tenuissima*. This is a low-maintenance grass that blows gracefully in the breeze. Its name is misleading; this is a native of Central Texas. Like Gulf Muhly, the height ranges from 1 foot to 3 feet. It takes very little water and likes sun or part shade. Put it in a mass planting and watch it transform your garden.

If you are looking for a tall grass, **Lindheimer's muhly**, *Muhlenbergia lindheimeri*, might be for you. Its average vertical size is about 5 feet; in some places it gets 6 feet high. This native grass requires medium water use. Plant in sun for best results.

An old garden favorite is **Monkey grass**. Commonly found in borders, monkey grass or lilyturf, *Liriope minor*, is a reliable choice because once established it is evergreen and trouble-free. Its height is generally under 6 inches, it tolerates almost any kind of light, and its water needs are average. However, do keep an eye on it. It can be aggressive.

Finally, we have to mention **Sideoats grama**, *Bouteloua curtipendula*. Unless you have a large, wild landscape this is a pretty accent grass but might be a little rough. It is a prairie grass of mid-height. But it is worth considering because since 1971, it has been the state grass of Texas.