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Renowned for growing an astonishing range of ornamental grasses, Knoll Gardens in Dorset, offers visitors a wealth of inspiration, as Roy Lancaster discovers. Photography Tim Sandall



Roy and nursery owner Neil Lucas amid a sea of ornamental grasses

Grassy focus

Neil is a keen all-round plantsman but it is when he talks about his grasses that you notice an extra passion in his voice and a doubling of adjectives. They are grown wherever he can find or make a space and are dominant in some places, especially effective when planted to contrast with other perennials. A large growing field at the far side of the garden has bed after bed of grasses in containers, established and ready to supply the sales area. Here, fescues, *Calamagrostis*, *Molinia*, *Panicum* and *Pennisetum*, in shades of green, grey, silver, blue, yellow, red and purple, create a shimmering sea – and these colours are produced by foliage alone.

I was particularly entranced with *Eragrostis trichodes* known as lovegrass in its native USA, a light airy mound of the most delicate panicles of shimmering, reddish-pink flowers in high summer. It can reach 1m or more and is drought tolerant, requiring a sunny, well-drained soil. Equally exciting is

E. 'Totnes Burgundy' in which the mature leaves turn to deep maroon beneath arching sprays of beige flowers.

Muhlenbergia dumosa (bamboo muhly) meanwhile, from southern Arizona and northwest Mexico, is a relatively new arrival at Knoll Gardens. Neil has been growing it under glass in a large pot and is now testing it for hardiness outside in a sunny, sheltered, well-drained spot. I was so impressed with this grass (which I first mistook for a slender-caned bamboo with narrow leaves) that I bought a plant to try on my Bagshot sand – where, I am pleased to say, it came through winter unscathed and is, by mid- to late summer, a loose 1.5m fountain of emerald filigree, ever moving in the slightest breeze.

Stipa ichu (syn. *Jarava ichu*) is another statement in elegance. Known as Peruvian needle grass, it produces mounds of fine green blades topped in summer by 60–90cm stems bearing drooping panicles of shimmering, silvery flowers in summer. It is like a taller-stemmed ▶

Various *Miscanthus* and *Cortaderia* selections provide grassy contrast to other perennials such as verbena and agapanthus in the nursery's display garden (below)

GRASSES FOR SHADE



Neil Lucas (left) recommends two to try at home

Coming from vast open spaces such as prairies, most of the grasses we grow prefer sunny, open, often dry positions. Some, however, enjoy shade – including one or two star performers that deal effectively with both damp and dry shade.



One of the most adaptable is *Anemanthele lessoniana* (syn. *Stipa arundinacea*) (above). It covers ground well in dry shade or even in full sun, only disliking wet soil. It quickly forms evergreen mounds of arching foliage in shades of greens, tans, orange and reds as the season progresses and is topped with trailing inflorescences of hazy pink in summer.



Hakone grass, from Japan, is another exceptional garden plant. *Hakonechloa macra* is an all-green species, while *H. macra* 'Aureola' (above) is subtly variegated, almost lime-yellow in shade (turning a stronger golden yellow when planted in sun). This is an ideal ground cover for growing under trees and in areas that receive little sun.

Nurseries to visit

THERE IS PROBABLY no greater admirer and grower of hardy ornamental grasses in Britain than Neil Lucas. His nursery, Knoll Gardens at Hampreston in Dorset, is a mecca for gardeners and collectors who find these narrow-leaved perennials (and occasional annuals) irresistible. Neil is one of Britain's leading suppliers of garden grasses which he grows in endless variety at his nursery as well as in his extensive and impressive display garden. Both these attract appreciative visitors from far and wide including those holidaying in the nearby coastal resorts of Bournemouth and Poole, as well as the New Forest.

I visited the nursery, not for the first time, in September last year. It is in an idyllic spot, approached by a winding country road and surrounded by woodland – just the place to spend an hour or two enjoying the peace and quiet as you stroll along grassy paths admiring a wealth of plants.

There are many fine ornamental trees here too, some of immense stature planted by a former owner John May more than 30 years ago, while Neil has added a goodly number of his own

favourites. Be prepared therefore to find *Quercus phellos* (willow oak), *Cladrastis kentukea* (yellow-wood), *Pseudolarix amabilis* (golden larch), eucryphias, stewartias, mountain ash and several unusual but hardy eucalypts. From September these are accompanied by the conspicuous fruits of an exciting range of shrubby *Viburnum* and *Euonymus* species. Spring and early-summer visitors can expect to see rhododendrons, azaleas, enkianthus and other choice shrubs in flower.

These woody plants give the garden a strong but informal structure providing a natural setting for a host of perennial plants in beds and borders. From late spring through to autumn these produce rich splashes of colour and swaths of bold foliage. Many of these perennials are available in the nursery and are continually being added to by Neil whose travels to the USA and elsewhere, plus his interest in trialling and experimenting, ensure a continuous supply of new and exciting species and cultivars. Despite these delights, it is for ornamental grasses that Knoll Gardens is best known.





Calamagrostis brachytricha



Pennisetum alopecuroides 'Cassian's Choice'



Miscanthus sinensis 'Flamingo'



Rhynchospora latifolia



Miscanthus nepalensis



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The nursery at Knoll Gardens (below) is a haven for gardeners and plantsmen alike



version of popular *Stipa tenuissima* but, cautions Neil, it is not hardy everywhere and needs sun and good drainage to thrive. More reliable are pampas grasses, especially *Cortaderia selloana* 'Evita', a favourite of Neil's for its dwarf nature and its 1.2m-stemmed plumes of cream flowers which, Neil points out, are produced even on young plants. It was a new one to me and struck me as a strong candidate for the smaller garden or else in a large container.

Fine fountain grasses

I have long been a fan of fountain grasses (*Pennisetum* species) which are now available in an increasingly wide range of cultivars – though not all them, it has to be said, are reliably hardy in British gardens. They love warm, sunny sites, preferably well drained. When I asked Neil to point out those he would particularly recommend – apart from ever-popular and reliable *P. alopecuroides* 'Hameln' and its attractive fuzzy, nodding spikes plus golden-tinted autumn foliage – he pointed out a selection introduced by American nurseryman Kurt Bluemel: *P. alopecuroides* 'Cassian's Choice'. This has bright green foliage turning a rich orange-yellow in autumn, topped off by 70–90cm stems with fluffy, light brown spikes of flowers.

Another favourite of his is *P. orientale* 'Shogun', a lovely grass whose blue-green foliage contrasts with its fluffy reddish spikes on 90–100cm stems. Even better, in Neil's opinion, is newly available *P.* 'Fairy Tails', also recommended by no less an authority than the American plantsman Rick Darke, whose book *The Encyclopedia of Grasses*

for *Livable Landscapes* is the grass-lover's bible. According to both Neil and Rick, this selection is hardy in the UK, healthy and free flowering over a long period through summer, its long, narrow, upright spikes spangled with purple anthers carried on swaying stems up to 1m.

Having engaged him on his favourite subject of the best grasses I asked Neil to recommend a few *Miscanthus* selections and I was not surprised when he showed me *M. sinensis* 'Yakushima Dwarf'. With its dense, leafy, green mounds and erect 1.5m stems bearing delicate buff-white, fingered inflorescences, this is a grass worthy of any garden. He had planted a large group of it by a path in his garden in half shade and it looked sensational. His second choice was *M. sinensis* 'Flamingo', with a loose, low habit, its slightly drooping, deep-pink-tinted young flowerheads borne on 1.8–2m stems. Grown in full sun, its leafy mounds often give rich orange tints in autumn. Similar in effect is *M. sinensis* 'Ferner Osten', another selection from the late, great German nurseryman and *Miscanthus*

champion Ernst Pagels; its compact clumps with stems to 2m flaunt compact panicles of deep, reddish flowers.

Other plants that caught my eye included justly popular *Calamagrostis brachytricha*: its feathery flowerheads are tinged red when they appear in autumn and it has a graceful, upright habit. This grass likes a reasonably moist soil, but not wet, unlike striking *Rhynchospora latifolia* which despite appearances is not a true grass at all, but a sedge. Its elegant, star-like flowerheads are long lasting and appear at the tops of 60cm stems. It will even grow as a pond marginal, such is its fondness of water.

Grasses in the garden

It is not just the rich variety of grasses that Neil grows that impresses but also the way he uses them in his garden. Take *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', for example, a beautiful yellow-striped selection of a grass from northeast-Asian woodlands much used in the West in containers and as a spot plant in borders. He has planted it in the soil circles at the base of trees in turf where it forms a superb and cheerful-looking summer

ground cover. I was particularly taken by one such display in a shady lawn that positively sparkled in the gloom.

It is 30 years ago that Neil Lucas gave up a short-lived career as a civil servant in London to join his family in Devon. Then, aged 21, he obtained work with a health trust in Torbay, moving quickly from gardener to Head Gardener then Gardens Manager, staying for 17 years before he and his parents bought the present site in 1994. At one time grasses to him were for mowing not growing in beds and borders. Now he cannot live without them, while his skills in displaying them at flower shows have earned him a clutch of gold medals including seven from the Chelsea Flower Show. He truly is the Grass Man for all seasons. ■

Roy Lancaster VMH, is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

i Knoll Gardens is an RHS Recommended Garden offering free access to members throughout its open period. For more details, see *Members' Handbook 2008*, p146. ● Neil Lucas holds grass masterclasses throughout the year; the next is on 9 October; see *Diary of Events* (enclosed in the centre of this issue), p12

Knoll Gardens is dramatic in late summer and autumn: the fluffy flowers of *Pennisetum* (above) contrast with the dark blades of *Phormium*

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