

# The learning curve

Val Bourne

This year I've been out and about much more than usual, having been rained off at Spring Cottage numerous times in spring and summer. I got to the Hampton Court Flower Show, after a three-year gap, and reacquainted myself with the charms of the papery blue daisy *Catananche caerulea*, or Cupid's Dart (fig. 1). It was in a show garden, woven through the fine filaments of ponytail grass, *Stipa tenuissima*, whose ash-blonde tresses highlighted the simple violet-blue flowers perfectly and picked up the silvery papery bracts to great effect. The darker-purple middle, and yellow stamens, seemed to jump out of the flower too, set against the swirl of grass. Even better, this combination would work brilliantly for the gardener, perhaps in meadow planting.

*Catananche caerulea* is easily raised from seed and will flower in its first year if sown in March. I haven't grown it recently, so I'd forgotten how airy the flowers are with their overlapping translucent scales. I have made a mental note to grow the blue form again from seed. And, if I see the larger-flowered form 'Major', which is raised from root cuttings, I will also buy that as well, although perhaps these flowers should not be too large. In drier soil, that emulates its natural position of Mediterranean dry pasture, catananche should prove perennial. On wetter sites it's perhaps best treated as an annual, although always leave it in: it may surprise you and come through, especially if *Stipa tenuissima* is a regular survivor for you – as it is for me. After all, hardiness is more about drainage than temperature.

I find that some gardeners still think you are bonkers to grow grasses, let alone love them as I do. Whether it's fear of their turning into rampant weeds, or of their self-seeding everywhere, I can't say. Perhaps it was an early brush with the stripy green and white Gardener's Garters, *Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* 'Picta', in the dim and distant past. Often seen in ponds, this 1960s favourite is a thug and would put anyone off. Most grasses form clumps, honestly, and they unite your planting schemes.

On the self-seeding front, most will fail to set seed in our cool climate. Indeed when in the 1950s the German plant breeder Ernst Pagels (1913–2007) decided to try and breed some forms of *Miscanthus*



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Fig. 1 *Catananche caerulea*

*sinensis*, he had to use a heated greenhouse to woo one of the earliest-flowering cultivars, ‘Gracillimus’, into producing a seed crop at all. Luckily his first batch of seedlings showed great variation and led to some fine forms including ‘Flamingo’, ‘Ferner Osten’ and ‘Graziella’. My own Pagels favourite is ‘Pünktchen’, a subtle green and yellow zebra grass that provides a thick sheaf of wonderful foliage.

If you think growing grasses is newfangled, note that luminaries of the past loved them too. Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932) grew variegated miscanthus at Munstead Wood. She recognised its value in casting light and pattern, and used the horizontally banded form we call ‘Zebrinus’. There’s a newer form, ‘Strictus’, with the similar yellow and green horizontal banding, but it’s rigidly upright whereas graceful ‘Zebrinus’ flows as the leaves arch away from the stem. Jekyll’s contemporary, William Robinson (1838–1935), was another fan. He grew miscanthus at Gravetye Manor. Then it was called the Chinese Silver Grass, *Eulalia japonica*, or Prince of Wales’ Feathers. [I once wrote an article entitled ‘Hallelujah for the *Eulalia*’ but my editor changed the title, which was probably wise.] They both grew their grasses alongside other types of plants, and I approve, for few of us have the room for a border solely dedicated to grasses. In any case I am not sure this works visually.

As you may suspect, I like grasses. In my old garden my favourite plant was a brown swirling carex that my neighbours always said looked dead. It was lovely in spring, though, underplanted with blue *Anemone blanda*. My favourite at Spring Cottage is the New Zealand Toetoe grass, *Cortaderia richardii*, which produces creamy white arching plumes by early July. The plumes reach 3m in height to dwarf the summerhouse, and survive wind and rain for six months of the year. On the outer edges of the garden, it looks particularly splendid in winter light when the low sun catches it as it shakes and

trembles. Grasses shimmy and sway like nothing else in the plant kingdom, and their fine awns add great winter texture (fig. 2).

I often wish I could do a Dorothy and whizz my garden further south or west by tornado, because being in the heart of the country means that grasses flower much later in the year. I can almost hear you saying “Be careful what you wish for!” I must content myself with late awns here, and I tell myself that having something new to admire in late September or October is a bonus. This

works until I get to RHS Wisley in July and see grasses exploding into flower a full six weeks before mine. A chat with the late Alan Bloom, on that very subject, led me to

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Fig. 2 December with grasses – in this case *Cortaderia selloana* Silver Feather

plant *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Silberfeder’, an old 1950s favourite selected by Hans Simon. It’s often derided by grass enthusiasts for breaking up early, but in most years it creeps into flower in August wherever you live, I recommend it for its many silvery plumes, dependable rather than exciting though it is.

I fell in love with grasses ten years ago after making a July visit to Lady Farm Gardens near Chelwood in Somerset (01761 490770) and then writing up the *Miscanthus* trial held at RHS Wisley. I ordered several *Miscanthus sinensis* varieties for Spring Cottage in 2006. They arrived as sticks in pots and I realise now that I should have ordered three of each and grouped them together. Some have made sensible clumps, although I’ve struggled to grow the variegated *Miscanthus sinensis* var. *condensatus* ‘Cosmopolitan’. This showy grass, with linear white and green variegation, has been very slow for me, although I recently saw it flourishing in a garden (further south, of course).

I’ve got round lots of gardens recently, and particularly enjoyed Caroline Todhunter’s garden, The Old Rectory, at Farnborough near Wantage. It has connections with John Betjeman, who lived there once, and a charming church complete with a John Piper memorial window to the poet. However it’s the garden that charms, and Caroline is a dedicated hands-on gardener. It’s in the Yellow Book and opens for groups. I also admired the combination of *Euphorbia sikkimensis*



popping up though *Crocosmia* ‘Lucifer’ (fig. 3) in Sibylle Kreutzberger’s private Gloucestershire garden. How I wished I’d thought about that combination. After all, I loved the way the acid-yellow flowers of my giant fennel tumbled into my ‘Lucifer’ last year. I raved about the colour combination which was completely accidental. Using *Euphorbia sikkimensis* is the natural progression, and how I wish I’d extended my thinking and come up with it. This year there is no light show in that part of the garden as my giant fennel (*Ferula communis*) has sulked in the cold summer.

A year ago now I gave a talk in Beverley for the East Yorkshire HPS Group, and met two grass enthusiasts, Gail and John Summerfield. Their Westshores Nurseries in North Lincolnshire specialises in grasses propagated at the nursery and they do mail order, so this knowledgeable and enthusiastic pair could be a starting point for you. Gail also does talks. (01724 733940 / [www.westshores.co.uk](http://www.westshores.co.uk)). 🌿

**Val Bourne** is an award-winning writer, author and lecturer. ([www.valbourne.co.uk](http://www.valbourne.co.uk)).

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