

Pennisetum alopecuroides - Fountain Grass (*Poaceae*)

Pennisetum alopecuroides is known as an ornamental grass often used for its radiating, fine-textured effect in the landscape. Fountain Grass is especially beautiful when the late summer breezes sway its bottlebrush-like inflorescences, but not noted for its winter appeal due to seed head shattering.

FEATURES

Form

-small- to medium-sized perennial ornamental grass species form matures at about 3.5' tall x 3.5' wide, but cultivars are smaller
-upright radiating growth habit in mid-spring (with new foliage) and late summer/autumn (with flowering and fruiting), but having an upright mounding growth habit in mid-summer (as the mature foliage arches and before the onset of flowering)



Culture

-full sun to partial sun
-prefers full sun in evenly moist, well-drained soils, but will adapt to poor soils with occasional drought; siting in partial shade will result in decreased vigor and virtually no flowering
-propagated reliably by division of the clump (preferably in spring), and also moderately self-sowing by seeds, although cultivars may bear seed that is not true to form
-Grass Family, with virtually no disease or pest problems
-abundantly available in containers
-occasional deep watering is needed during periods of drought in summer to keep the foliage from rolling and twisting, and it is common to see the tips of the foliage turn brown during these times
-shear the dead portions back to 3" above the ground by late Mar. (use gloves when handling the subtly serrated foliage), to allow the new growth to emerge unhindered
-about every third year, propagate by division of the clump into several pieces in early spring (after shearing the dead foliage away) and discard the center of the clump (and any other peripheral portions which have died)

Foliage

-foliage emerges fairly early (for an ornamental grass) in the spring, but does not significantly expand until consistently warm weather arrives
-thin blades (about 0.25" wide) radiate directly from the basal crowns, being medium green, arching, and fine-textured
-foliage starts to turn shades of yellow, yellowish green, and amber in late summer before frost; after frosts and freezes, it matures to a light tan

Flowers

-emerging lime-green in early Sept., and rapidly changing to a blend of green, pink, and violet shades before maturing to light tan fruits (grains), in late Aug. through mid-Sept.

-inflorescences are 5" long bristly spikes, having a very fine-textured bottlebrush appearance, radiating on long thin stalks above and beyond the foliage, and swaying in the late summer breezes

Fruits

-small grains are hidden within the bristles, maturing to a light tan color but steadily shattering (abscising) after a few hard freezes, and fully shattered from the fruiting stalk by the end of winter

USAGE

Function

-a specimen or focal point plant, used in raised planters, foundations, entranceways, borders, group or mass plantings, and near bodies of water

Texture

-fine texture
-thick density

Assets

-radiating growth habit of foliage, inflorescences, and seed heads
-fine-textured bottlebrush-like inflorescences and seed heads
-inflorescences and fruiting heads sway in the gentle breezes, giving movement to the landscape

Liabilities

-seed heads start to shatter just after maturity in early autumn, and continuously shatter throughout autumn and winter, leaving the dead foliage and bare fruit stalks for a less-than-appealing "winter effect"
-shriveling of the foliage during periods of summer drought, although it is drought-tolerant
-death of the center of the crown within 2-3 years of planting, which is also typical of *Miscanthus*
-need for thinning and propagation about every third year in Spring
-annual Mar. pruning of the dead foliage to just above the ground
-marginally hardy in northern areas of zone 5, and with die-out of large portions of the crown in some zone 5 winters

Habitat

-Zones 5 to 9
-Native to China

SELECTIONS

Alternates

-ornamental grasses with a low, radiating or mounding growth habit (*Festuca ovina*, *Helictotrichon sempervirens*, *Luzula sylvatica* etc.)

Variants

-*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' - dwarf form to 2' x 2', the standard form sold in the nursery trade due to its compact habit, flowering about 2 weeks earlier than the species form

-*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Little Bunny' - superdwarf form to 1' x 1', an excellent green-foliaged alternative to *Festuca ovina* var. *glauca* (Blue Fescue), flowering lightly but more or less continuously from early July through mid-Aug. (up to 2 months before the species form, with strictly light green inflorescences)

-*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Moudry' - Black Fountain Grass - a vigorous form, 3' x 3', with dark purple inflorescences 3-5 weeks after the species form, having wider (0.75") leaf blades, and with a very strong tendency to self-sow