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Garden designer John Greenlee's love affair with grasses

By Mary James, SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

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/ Saxon Holt

Sedge and 'Siskiyou Blue' fescue are among the plants in this meadow garden surrounding a Santa Cruz home.



Ruth Chivers

Grass expert and author John Greenlee wants homeowners to rethink traditional lawns. “A meadow garden is easy on the planet because it uses less water, less energy and needs less care.”

DETAILS

John Greenlee, “Meadows by Design,” at the monthly meeting of the San Diego Horticultural Society

When: Feb. 8 at 6 p.m.

Where: The Surfside Race Place at the Del Mar Fairgrounds

Admission: Free to SDHS members; \$10 for guests

Information: Details are at sdhortsoc.org

Plantsman, nursery owner and garden designer John Greenlee first fell in love with meadows as a youngster playing in a field of ear-tickling grass near his Orange County home.

Decades later, the allure of this iconic landscape remains irresistible, “like a seductive mistress,” he writes in his new Timber Press book, “The American Meadow Garden.” “Grasses are sensual. You can smell them and hear them and watch them move. Meadows are sexy, just like lovers — they never stop changing, never ceasing to surprise.”

Starting in the 1980s, Greenlee has spurred a horticultural revolution that has put a growing array of ornamental grasses into nurseries and gardens everywhere. Now he wants homeowners married to “time-consuming, synthetic chemical-sucking” lawns to abandon turf in favor of shimmering meadows alive with grasses and flowers, birds and butterflies.

Last year, he helped design a new meadow garden at the Water Conservation Garden on the campus of Cuyamaca College in El Cajon. The sickle-shaped, 900-square-foot planting features undulating ribbons of eight kinds of grasses and grasslike sedges studded with South African bulbs that add spring and summer color. On Feb. 8, Greenlee returns to San Diego to share his meadow romance and sign copies of his book at the monthly meeting of the San Diego Horticultural Society at the Surfside Race Place at the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

A few weeks ago, Greenlee relaxed on the patio of his Bay Area home with its view of the San Bruno Mountains for a passionate telephone conversation about lessons learned, meadow “sweeteners,” and “the big chop.”

QUESTION: Take us back in time when ornamental grasses weren’t popular. What changed?

ANSWER: When I was studying horticulture at Cal Poly Pomona in 1978, nobody taught about ornamental grasses and there were basically two in the nursery trade — blue fescue and pampas grass. Turf got all the attention. When I designed my first garden with grasses in 1980, there were no plans and no plants. But people started to realize there are hundreds of varieties that are garden worthy for foliage and flowers. All of a sudden they just caught on.

QUESTION: What do we know now about grasses that we didn’t know 20 years ago?

ANSWER: For starters some don’t work. Some need too much water. Some are really invasive. Some need winter chill. If you plant Japanese blood grass (*Imperata cylindrica* ‘Rubra’) in Chula Vista it won’t grow

because it needs a cold winter which you don't get there. Some don't like the alkaline soils in Southern California. Or the heat. I put much of that information in my first book, "The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses" (Rodale, 1992). Since then, we've learned a whole lot more and that's in the new book.

QUESTION: What excites you about grasses now?

ANSWER: My role now is creating natural lawns or meadows and my new book empowers gardeners to do this themselves. There are grasses that we can walk on like conventional turf. They can even be mowed, but they don't need the once-a-week mowing a lawn does. Meadows combine grasses, bulbs and other flowering plants. Why have a boring lawn when you can have a meadow garden instead? It's a concept that's very adaptable, whether you have 200 square feet or 200,000.

QUESTION: Why do you call meadows "the natural alternative to traditional lawn"?

ANSWER: The amount of air pollution generated by mowers, blowers and edgers in Los Angeles in a single day totals 22 tons. That's worse for the environment than cars. Then there's all the water a lawn uses. As for a small lawn, that's an even bigger bit of ecological silliness. You spend \$500 for a machine that roars and belches over a green rug once a week. A meadow garden is easy on the planet because it uses less water, less energy and needs less care.

QUESTION: What keeps a meadow from being messy, brown and unattractive?

ANSWER: Meadow gardens are inspired by nature, but they are designed and the possibilities are endless. Let's say you'd like a moonlight meadow with gold- and silver-foliaged grasses. Or a cottage garden meadow with roses and daffodils. Or a minimalist meadow styled with only two dramatic grasses. And why have succulents in a ghetto by themselves when you can add soft grasses? I try to design to get the most green for the least water.

QUESTION: You're a fan of bulbs in meadow gardens. Name some favorites.

ANSWER: There are so many bulbs that work perfectly with grasses — that are low-water too. I liken tritonia, mariposa lily (*Calochortus*), species freesias, watsonia, species kniphofia, and *Urginia maritima* with those fabulous white flower spikes. I have lists in the book for low-growing or tall meadows, and for meadows of different styles. There are also lots of choices for flowers — daisies, sages, poppies, irises. These are the "sweeteners," the accessories. They can be orchestrated to have color spread throughout the seasons.


QUESTION: What are the mistakes gardeners make working with grasses?

ANSWER: Sometimes they pick a grass that is short-lived and when it dies, they think they have failed. Sometimes they plant grasses too close together and don't give them room to grow. And sometimes they put too many different kinds together and then the planting looks messy. Remember too if you're planting a meadow where there was lawn, you first have to get rid of the lawn.

Mary James is a San Diego garden writer and the executive editor of California Garden, the magazine of the San Diego Floral Association.

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