

Guru of grasses wants you to reconsider conventional lawns



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Grasses aren't just for lawns. John Greenlee, owner of Greenlee Nursery, creates meadows of grasses for all sorts of gardening conditions and sizes of gardens. Courtesy of Greenlee Nursery

He's the guru of grasses, the maestro of meadows. When he talks about grasses, he beams, he paces, his eyes light up. He exudes passion. His enthusiasm is contagious. He uses words like "groovy" and "exciting." Botanical names roll off his tongue as easily as water over a dam: *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, *Calamagrostis acutiflora* *Stricta*, *Carex hachijoensis*, *Paspalum quadrifarium*, *Carex pansa*. He practically jumps up and down.

He's John Greenlee, owner of Greenlee Nursery in Pomona, author, and an award-winning garden designer. With 20-plus years of experience studying, propagating, promoting and designing with grasses, Greenlee has turned his attention to lawns and meadow grasses. He wants Californians to get off the high water-high maintenance treadmill of conventional lawns.

"I'm not against lawns," Greenlee said, "but I'm against lawns that don't make any sense anymore. They're not being used or are too small for playing ball. Maybe the kids have grown up and gone, or the trees have grown and now the lawn is shady and the grass declining. From a design standpoint, lawns can provide a cool, green, low, walkable place for the eye to rest. But consider a natural lawn of *Carex pansa*, for example, that looks like tall fescue, but only needs five mowings a year and water once a week in the hot Sacramento Valley.

"We're showing people how, by killing their lawn and planting these lower maintenance, lower energy-using lawns and meadows, within about 18 to 24 months they can justify the costs through reduced maintenance costs, reduced water and reduced amounts of fertilizer."

If you're not ready to rip out the lawn and plant a meadow, no problem, Greenlee says. "Ornamental grasses are versatile; there are grasses for every garden, whether it's a small garden, a big garden, a sunny garden, a shady garden, a wet garden, a dry garden. Maybe you have palms or succulents. There are grasses that fit right in."

New to Greenlee's repertoire are grasses for shady situations. "You crave shade in the Sacramento Valley, but what grows alongside the tree's greedy roots? We now have a lot more grasses for the shade."

Ornamental grasses have come a long way since Greenlee started his nursery in 1987. At that time, he was one of a handful of nurseries growing ornamental grasses. "It's been a long road. When I got started, the only grasses available were pampas grass and blue fescue. The term "ornamental grass" didn't exist.

(Mention grass) and it was something cows could eat it or you could whack a ball on it. It was turf grass or range management."

Now, Greenlee notes, the newest edition of the Sunset Western Garden Book devotes a section to ornamental and meadow grasses.

Looking at the meadow gardens he's been creating for the past five years or so, Greenlee says that gardening with meadow grasses combines ecology and horticulture. "I've spent a lot of years trying to get people excited about grasses, and I feel now (the grasses') time has finally come."

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

What: Garden designer John Greenlee, owner of Greenlee Nursery in Pomona, talks about turning a conventional lawn into a low- maintenance meadow.