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NATURE

NATURE; In the Thick Of Great Grasses

By ANNE RAVER

BALDWIN, Md.— WHEN Kurt Bluemel arrived in the United States more than 40 years ago, most gardeners thought grass was just another word for lawn. Fresh from working among the 6,000 different plants at the Arnold Vogt nursery near Zurich, Mr. Bluemel went to work for a nursery in Monkton, Md., whose plant list filled one page. Mr. Bluemel, now 70, is today considered one of America's foremost nurseryman and, many would say, the king of ornamental grasses.

The Walt Disney Company called on Mr. Bluemel in 1996 when it was building the African-style savannah at its Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Fla. He planted hundreds of grasses himself, testing about 500 varieties, of which 250 are now thriving on the 125-acre site. The queen of the savannah was a grass that had been kicking around the greenhouse for years, *Paspalum quadrifarium*. "Now, it's going to be Florida's plant of the year in 2004," he said.

Mr. Bluemel had worked in Swiss gardens for almost 20 years when he came to Maryland. In Switzerland, building rock walls and paths had been as important as growing flowering trees and perennials, but here a garden meant vegetables and lawns bordered by day lilies and phlox. He went, he said, "from daily fresh croissants, fresh breads and the best cheeses, to two-day-old bread, margarine and powdered milk."

At first he made so little money he had to dig graves to support his wife and two children. But in 1964, with the financial backing of a friend, he was able to buy his own place, a run-down 43-acre farm with a listing barn, a collapsed log house and an outhouse in Baldwin, Md. What was important to him was the south-facing slope and the fast-running stream.

"Perennials at that time was a slumbering giant," Mr. Bluemel said, opening the door to one of his greenhouses. These greenhouses, along with 190 acres on the Eastern Shore and 15 acres in St. Cloud, Fla., make up the Bluemel Nurseries, a wholesale operation that produces four million to five million plants a year.

He led the way through a wondrous sea of grasses, from tall, 10-foot plumed cortaderias like Andes Silver and Patagonia -- started from seeds he collected in the Andes in 1991 -- to the filmy miscanthus Morning Light, which he found 15 years ago collecting dust at the National Arboretum. He has an artist's eye -- and a businessman's, too -- for the undiscovered stars of the plant world.

We walked past carexes, or sedges, in colors from near-black to gold. "Squint," Mr. Bluemel commanded. "The textures and colors blend into each other," he said. "It's like Monet painting a meadow."

I squinted at the rows of potted *Carex elata* Bowles Golden, a short sedge with spiky golden-striped leaves; *Ophiopogon japonicus*, a dark-green dwarf mondo grass; and a black mondo grass called Niger. The gold, green and black blurred into fields of color.

"*Carex* is fascinating, especially for the East Coast," Mr. Bluemel said. "*Liriope* freezes and falls flat, like a dead herring. *Carex* keeps its texture in winter. It looks beautiful dusted with snow."

He was equally enthusiastic about a bearskin fescue (*Festuca glauca* Pic Carlit) that looks velvety, but is as sharp as a pin. "It's especially good in the north, where it forms these bearskinlike mats," he said. "It's absolutely gorgeous under white birch trees."

The Washington-based landscaping firm of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates called upon Mr. Bluemel to grow 3,000 *Rudbeckia Goldsturms* for an extensive 12-acre planting around the complex of embassies at the International Center in Washington.

"We couldn't have done all that revolutionary garden design without Kurt Bluemel," said James van Sweden, who with his

partner, the landscape architect Wolfgang Oehme, helped popularize large sweeps of grasses and more naturalistic landscapes.

Mr. Bluemel's own garden, on a hill behind the nursery, and the beds around his office have enchanted designers for years. Here are masses of another plant Mr. Bluemel pulled from oblivion, *Chrysanthemum pacificum*, a ground-cover form of mum with white-edged green leaves.

Brought to the National Arboretum from Japan in 1973, *Chrysanthemum pacificum* had gone nowhere -- until 1985, when Mr. Bluemel turned a few divisions into 18,000 plants. The next year, the mum appeared on the cover of the Parks Seed catalog.

Japanese blood grass made its debut here after Frank Cabot, who started the Garden Conservancy, gave Mr. Bluemel a piece of it from Asia. Mr. Bluemel promptly named the plant Red Baron and planted a ribbon of it on his lawn. As soon as members of the Perennial Plant Association saw it, it took off in American gardens.

"Kurt's garden has been a significant influence on nurserymen and design people," said Rick Darke, whose book "The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses" (Timber Press, 1999) is the bible of grasses. "When grasses were still new to North America, you could go to Kurt and see not just 10 grasses in the landscape, but 40."

He has collected alpine plants from all over the world, like the candytuft *Iberis saxatilis* that has liberally seeded itself along the rock walls of his terrace. His beloved grasses are everywhere, even in the vegetable patch. Heavy Metal, a panicum Mr. Bluemel named for its upright stance and its steely blue and gray shades, keeps company with trellised tomatoes by the kitchen door.

Some perennials here, like the *Rudbeckia fulgida* Goldsturm, a black-eyed Susan, have made a round trip as Europeans took them home, cultivated them and sent them back to America, years later.

As Mr. Bluemel is fond of saying, "We send our plants to Europe for finishing school." But he is the one who puts plants through college and sends them out in the world, where he knows they will be gainfully employed.

In addition to about 700 kinds of grasses, Mr. Bluemel grows 100 bamboos and 700 herbaceous peonies at his wholesale nursery. Groups may visit Bluemel by appointment (800-498-1560; www.bluemel.com). Gardeners wishing to purchase plants may contact Earthly Pursuits in Windsor Mill, Md., which is run by Mr. Bluemel's sister Monica Burwell (www.earthlypursuits.com or 410-496-2523).

Photos: GRASS KING -- Kurt Bluemel, below, with an experimental stand of bamboo, *Phyllostachys pubescens* Heterocyclus; left, a ribbon of *Imperata Red Baron*.; MARYLAND SAVANNAH -- *Miscanthus sinensis* Flamingo, above left, one of 700 grasses cultivated at Bluemel Nurseries.; BIRD COVER -- Exotic grasses add flair to a garden. Above, Bowles Golden and Burgundy Giant; center left, *Pumila*; and center right, Red Baron. (Kurt Bluemel); (Linda Day Clark for The New York Times)