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Preaching the gospel of grass

John Greenlee knows ornamentals a great alternative to water-hungry lawns

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When John Greenlee first started preaching the gospel of grass, 20 years before turf became a four-letter word, he may as well have been babbling in tongues.

It would take a Green Revolution on top of a lingering drought to make the public finally see that "lawn" could be more than an uninterrupted plain of stubby, densely packed green blades as needy as a newborn baby.

"When I went to school at Cal Poly (Pomona), my degree was in horticulture," said Greenlee. "Back then, there were two kinds of grass. Pampas grass and Blue Fescue. And grass was nothing more to consider than whether a cow could eat it or whether you could whack a ball on it."

But it was the late Marshall Olbrich, the horticulturist extraordinaire of the legendary Western Hills Rare Plant Nursery in Occidental, who introduced a young Greenlee to the vast ornamental possibilities in grass. He also turned him on to the Baltimore nursery of Kurt Bluemel, who first pioneered the marketing of ornamental grasses back in 1964.

"We shipped back from Bluemel refrigerated tractor-trailerloads of grasses," he remembers. "They were stopped at the border because the tag guys had never even seen ornamental grasses. Nobody in those days knew what they were."

Greenlee opened his own nursery in Chino in 1987 and brazenly showed up the San Francisco Flower and Garden Show at Fort Mason with his unusual wares.



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / PD

John Greenlee used different types of grasses as an alternative to common turf at this meadow surrounding a small lake at a Napa property he landscaped.

“All the society ladies thought I was from Mars. But at the end of the day,” he says, “ornamental grasses caught on and people don’t give a (second) thought to using them.”

Now Greenlee, who lives on the Peninsula and is toasted as “The Grass Man,” has taken the concept of landscaping with grasses to a new level.

He is standing in a sea of *Pennisetum spathiolatum*, hundreds of them, with their narrow dark green blades and tawny tapers. Also known as Slender Veldt Grass, these densely packed stalks create a shimmering spectacle as they catch the late afternoon sun in a meadow on the eastern ridge of the Mayacmas Mountains overlooking Napa.

While this mountain meadow may look like a work of nature, it is really a garden — a meadow garden — one of the newest design ideas slowly taking hold in a post-turf world.

Greenlee is leading a new revolution to replace not just front lawns, but large landscapes with meadows of gently waving grasses, layers of different varieties, interspersed with bulbs to add dollops of color.

He will show others how he does it in “The American Meadow Garden: Creating a Natural Alternative to the Traditional Lawn,” slated to be released by Timber Press in late October.

“Meadow making is a process. For me, it’s a whole style of gardening,” says Greenlee, a grass guru who is transforming America, one lawn at a time, from the San Diego Zoo in Southern California and Disney’s Animal Kingdom in Florida, to private residences in Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

People can see a miniature version of his meadow garden today and Sunday during “The Late Show Gardens,” a fall garden show built around the theme of sustainability. The festival is being held at Cornerstone of Sonoma, an outdoor gallery of mini exhibition gardens created by some of the world’s best designers.

Among his favorite grasses are low-growing groundcovers that can spread to form lawn-like surfaces that can be walked on, but which require only a fraction of the care and maintenance. These low-growing grasses and sedges provide the foundation for Greenlee’s meadow gardens. His top pick for this region is *Carex pansa* or California sedge, which can take heat and is drought tolerant. And the real beauty? It needs to be cut only about four times a year.

In this sweeping Napa garden — three acres spreading out around a small lake — Greenlee has used the *Carex pansa* for pathways cutting through the tall grasses, including the *Pennisetum* “Fairy Tails” or Evergreen Fountain Grass, that forms 2- to 3-foot-wide clumps with upright foliage and dark wheat colored blooms.

While they don't give that brisk, buzz-cut precision look of traditional lawn grass, these native meadow grasses, Greenlee says, can serve a similar purpose. They're a little shaggier, less manicured, but will take gentle foot traffic.

Greenlee has carefully thought out his palette, a balance of tall and low grasses interspersed with dabs of color — asters, daylilies, helianthus, strawberries, johnny jump-ups.

One can start easy, with a foundation of something like *Caryx pansa*, and layer on other grasses and bulbs over time. But you don't need a ton of different varieties. Large expanses of a single type can make a strong statement, like *Deschampsia*, a native grass commonly called Fairy Wand grass because of its beautiful cloud-like blossoms.

Although this Napa garden is relatively young, there is much going on, a changing show throughout the year. In October, the switchgrass will turn a brilliant orange red. Set against the more golden and wheat colored grasses and the ginkgo trees, "rocket ships of brilliant yellow," as he describes them, the site is a far different kind of eye candy than a multicolored rose garden, but no less satisfying.

The best part of this kind of garden, however, is in the environmental benefits. Less upkeep, far less water, no chemicals required to keep it green or to combat pests.

"The sound you're not hearing right now in this garden is the sound of mowers, blowers and edgers," Greenlee marvels, pausing in a hushed field of tall, feathery stalks, moving silently in the breeze.

"And yet that is what we do in this country. We make lawn. Hundreds of thousands of square miles of lawn. In the three-county Los Angeles basin, 22 tons of air pollution is spewed from mowers, every single day. And if you don't think we're putting that much pollution into the Bay Area from lawn culture, you are wrong. Either you're part of the solution or part of the problem. And yet, I think I win more people over with a message of just how beautiful these things are."

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