
How to grow Panicum virgatum 'Heavy Metal'

Grasses like Panicum virgatum 'Heavy Metal' have distinct personalities. Softly tactile pennisetums almost curtsy to the ground like a cat in the sun waiting to be stroked.

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The majestic miscanthus flutters over the garden as imperiously as the Royal Standard above Buckingham Palace. Panicums form billowing cumulus clouds.

Their tiny beaded spikelets in pink and purple shimmer and shake, picking up the colour of late-season flowers in toning shades of pink and purple.



How Panicum virgatum 'Heavy Metal' looks in June and then December Photo: PHOTOLIBRARY.COM

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Often the leaves of panicums can be colourful, too, and the 5ft-tall Panicum virgatum 'Heavy Metal' is named for its fine sheath of blue-grey foliage that remains upright from spring until autumn. The purple-pink inflorescences crown the plant as effectively as a cress haircut sprouting from an eggshell head.

It's the contrast between the rigid, stainless-steel foliage and purple-pink froth that charms. In warm summers the foliage has some pink tones, but generally the greyer-leaved panicums stay steely as the temperatures drop.

Panicum virgatum is a common native in prairies, woodland edges, dunes and marshes in a tract of land that runs from eastern Canada down to Central America.

The drier state of California and the colder Pacific north-west get missed along the way, for this long-lived grass thrives in warm growing conditions in sun or good light. Growing preferences and form vary.

The taller blue-leaved 'Prairie Sky' was found by Roger Gettig, a landscape architect based at the Holden Arboretum in Ohio, growing by a Wisconsin railway. This 6ft grass can flop a little late into the year.

Despite its American provenance *P. virgatum* (or switch grass) was taken up by German landscapers and gardeners first.

The leaves of Karl Foerster's 'Rotstrahlbusch' colour up to burgundy, but this 50-year-old grass has probably been superseded by Hans Simon's shorter 'Shenandoah'. This has the best burgundy-wine leaves in autumn, averaging 4ft.

'Rehbraun' (red-brown) was selected by Hänse Herms for its rusty foliage and it's a similar height. 'Hänse Herms' is similar.

More recently Kurt Bluemel, a nurseryman and landscape designer from Maryland in the US, who is often dubbed the king of the grasses, has selected three.

They include the already mentioned 'Heavy Metal'. His other two are 'Squaw' and 'Warrior'. The 4ft-tall 'Squaw' has strong pink inflorescences that emerge through green foliage.

Leaves develop red-purple tones in September. The taller 'Warrior' (6ft) has green leaves and pink-red panicles. All are widely available, but 'Squaw' is often considered the better of the two.

When choosing, consider the heights (which can vary between 3ft and 6ft) and then decide if you want foliage colour or flowery inflorescence.

If you opt for foliage, give your grass space to shine. If it's frothy pink-purple flowers you're after, drift several together among late-season perennials.

Growing tips

Those in warmer parts of Britain will do best with *Panicum virgatum* because it thrives on cold winters followed by warm summers. Given these conditions, panicums will flower by early September.

Plant in full sun so that the soil warms up as quickly as possible. Water in the early stages of growth because panicums enjoy fertile, moist soil. They are not plants for a dry, hot spot. Divide in spring, just as growth starts.

The heads are small and intricate, so to create an effect panicums should be planted in drifts. Leave 2½ft between plants.

Most panicums will be planted in autumn, when they catch the gardener's eye. Prepare the ground well and dig a larger hole (about twice the size) and incorporate organic matter so the plant isn't sitting in a wet sump.

Good companions

Knoll Gardens, at Wimborne in Dorset, uses drifts of panicums with later-flowering echinaceas in sunset shades. The best custard-toned echinacea is 'Harvest Moon', and the bead-like panicles of the panicum pick up the bronzed cones perfectly.

The pink-purple awns can also be used to pick up other plummy-toned grasses such as Miscanthus sinensis 'Ferner Osten' and 'Flamingo'. The addition of a wine-leaved shrub unites the scheme.

The bluer-toned leaves of 'Heavy Metal' can be used with tall yellow daisies (such as Rudbeckia laciniata 'Herbstonne') and choice goldenrods including Solidago rugosa 'Fireworks'.