

Ornamental grasses changed the look of American gardens. There was a time, however, and it wasn't that long ago, when ornamental grasses were missing from the American landscape. It took the skill and passion of a great landscape architect to bring this important group of plants to the attention of American gardeners. Wolfgang Oehme, a renowned Baltimore landscape architect, had more to do with America's love for ornamental grasses than anyone past or present. He pioneered their use in commercial and residential gardens. Oehme was born in Germany in 1930, immigrated to America in 1957 and passed away in 2011. I had the great privilege of meeting him and touring several of his outstanding grass-dominated garden designs in the late 1990s. He was quite a character. When I continued to refer to him as Mr. Oehme, he paused, turned to me and said, "Please, friends call me 'Wolfee.'" I held this iconic designer in such high regard that I found it impossible to comply with that request. However, during our tour, I did summon the courage to ask if it was true that he celebrated his birthdays by inviting friends to his garden for "weeding parties." He smiled and nodded in the affirmative. Definitely my kind of gardener! Oehme was no fan of the prevailing garden design style of his time. He especially disliked traditional landscapes with bare front lawns that opened to the street with overgrown bushes around the house. He preferred the wild garden look, what he called "horticultural explosions," masses of ornamental grasses and flowering perennials that evoked the feeling of ocean waves. Grasses, he preached, added movement to a garden, changed with the seasons and looked gorgeous even during the dead of winter. The popularity of ornamental grasses seems to have waned a little in recent years. And that's unfortunate. Their presence totally changes the mood and feel of a garden, all for the better I might add. It's worth noting that ornamental grasses pull off this herculean task while tolerating droughts, hail, wind, flash flooding, clay soils and most insects and diseases. They are Oklahoma tough. Here is a sampling of my favorite ornamental grasses. Northwind Switchgrass (*Panicum*

virgatum): This compact, clumping grass has outstanding vertical form. Winter, when this species turns golden yellow, is my favorite season for Northwind. Mid-summer flower panicles also are extra special. Its tight vertical form makes it especially effective in tight garden spaces. Morning Light Miscanthus (*Miscanthus senensis*): Morning Light is one of the most versatile, tough and long lasting of ornamental grasses. This elegant grass has fine arching white and green variegated foliage that gives it a silvery appearance in the garden. Beautiful creamy white flower plumes appear in late summer. I enjoy collecting the ornamental plumes for indoor decorations. Ruby Grass Melinus (*Rhynchelytrum neriglume*): While the complicated Latin name is certainly a mouth full, you may be assured that the dazzling beauty of this ornamental grass is pure eye candy. Ruby Grass is a modest-sized plant, only 24 to 30 inches in height. Despite its modest size, its impact in the garden is explosive. I grow this little jewel primarily for its gorgeous amethyst-pink flower plumes that appear in mid-summer and delight the eye through early fall. Ruby Grass, a native of South Africa, is not entirely cold hardy in the Tulsa area. Plant it in the spring and enjoy season-long beauty. The three plants listed represent only the tip of the iceberg. Invest in ornamental grasses for a much more exciting garden. Barry Fugatt is director of horticulture at the Tulsa Garden Center and Linnaeus Teaching Garden in Woodward Park. He may be reached by email at: bfugatt@tulsagardencenter.com