

NEW AND IMPROVED?

Sometimes it seems as if we are literally being run over by change and the only way to survive is to dive into the ditch of the past. Any serious perusal of history may persuade us that the 'good old days' were never all that good and Mr. Dickens' comment on the best of times and the worst of times may be universally valid. However, we surely are living in times where change is accelerating, even in our gardens. 'Miss Lucy' is proof!

'Miss Lucy' is not only the name attached to the partial skeleton of that fossil hominid thought to be three million years old found in Ethiopia in 1974, it is the name of a new lily without pollen! Has there been concern about bright yellow pollen staining white tablecloths, a concern easily solved, snip, snip, snip? 'Miss Lucy' is the first double-flowered Oriental Lily to be without pollen, a major breakthrough and she is a charming pink and white flower as well. She also possesses the lily fragrance but not to an overwhelming degree, which makes her a better dining companion.

Other startling changes have brought us tie-dyed petals in several species and grasses with new colors in their plumes. With any new and improved product, it is good to wait a bit to see if the plant is invasive. We have learned to use 'vigorous' and 'spreading' species only where soil is poor or in places limited by house or driveway. Vinca is invasive, even the pretty variegated one, but it is easily pulled out. A greater problem is *Lonicera japonica*, Japanese honeysuckle, still offered in catalogs despite the fact that it is second to Kudzu, *Puereria lobata*, in its invasive quality. Smells heavenly but that is no excuse not to pull it out. It is eternal, grows for ever and is capable of altering understory bird habitat.

Many new grasses are available, grasses that you do not need to mow! This winter convinced me that grasses are absolutely indispensable for every garden. They live up to their press: they are great in every season. *Calamagrostis x arundinacea* 'Eldorado' is new. This feather reed grass is upright like 'Karl Foerster' but has gold variegation in the center of the broad leaf. It loves sun and part shade and grows to 4'. In late summer the pinkish flower spikes appear. Pink is also a feature of a new *Anemanthele* – aka *Stipa arundinacea*. It is also called New Zealand wind grass and this plant grows in sun or part shade to a mere foot or 14" so it will make a fine edging plant. *Anemanthele lessoniana* tm 'Sirocco Stipa' has fantastic foliage with a pink leaf blade in a fine textured mounded plant.

Just the names of the *Carex* species make you want to plant these sedges: Toffee Twist, Aurea, Ice Dance, Cappuccino. One of them, *C. pennsylvanica*, is not new but newly appreciated. It is a North American native and makes a fine ground cover as it grows to only eight inches. It may be evergreen in our area and its gold highlights will lighten a shady spot. A shade brightener is a new *Hakonechloa macra* 'All Gold'. H.m. 'Aureola' is the earlier Japanese forest grass but it may have needed more sun, semi-shade rather than full shade. Perhaps the taller, newer one is more robust?

If you love the look of weird grasses in flower arrangements, you might love the new *Juncus* 'Big Twister'. This corkscrew rush has sturdy upright spiral stems 18" to 2'. For a bog spot the smaller *J. filiformis* 'Spiralis' has dark green thready foliage that grows spaghetti-like, all in a heap in or near a pond. There is also a new Muhly grass, *Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud' reputed to be tolerant of what our summers provide – heat, drought, and humidity. It grows to three feet and boasts fluffy white panicles arising from its thin green foliage in late summer through fall.

If you are partial to ribbon grass, there is a charming *Phalaris arundinacea* 'Strawberries & Cream' which will have pink on the foliage when the weather is cool, making it useful in bouquets of autumn asters. We know our native *Tradescantia*, spiderwort, is not a grass but it has grass-like foliage that sprawls tiresomely

and must be cut back to improve it much too often. The Tradescantia cultivar 'Sweet Kate' has the usual triangular 3-petaled deep blue flower with chartreuse foliage and, best of all, it has foliage to a mere foot, not a lanky two feet. It tends to stay upright from spring to fall and the foliage does not sink to green, neat! All of these plants have the ability to thrive without continual TLC. They also come back better than ever, year after year, and provide movement in the landscape with the slightest bit of breeze. The grasses can be cut back in early spring but I notice if I don't get around to it, the new blades manage to come through just fine and eventually the old stems fall away. You may have noticed where they are used in highway medians, they are sheared off eight or so inches from the ground, not a pretty sight, but they do regrow quickly.