

# FINE PLUMAGE

Are pampas grasses out of date? Certainly not, says **David Jewell**, who suggests the best ways to use these majestic plants and picks his choice of selections from a current RHS trial. Photography by Tim Sandall

**MOST PEOPLE ARE** familiar with pampas grass (*Cortaderia*). Their plume-like flowerheads, so tall and spectacular in mid to late summer, can look magnificent with bold associate planting and imaginative placement. Plants are at their most dramatic set against a darker background, surrounded by open space where their elegant form can be appreciated; crammed in a corner this dignified appearance is lost. The luminous qualities of the flowers are best

displayed when a bold-sized group is viewed with background sunlight streaming through them.

Comprising approximately 25 species, most are native to South America but five (called toetoe, pronounced toy-toy) are from New Zealand and one from New Guinea. All are usually found naturally in open habitats, often in vast colonies. As warm-season growers they need full sun but tolerate various soil types, and are drought tolerant once established – although in the UK, where they are generally considered hardy, a moisture-retentive, fertile soil is best. Indeed most cultivated species and selections enjoy a waterside location and look superb seen reflected in water.

However, these once-admired grasses are today decidedly unpopular. Perhaps unimaginative planting and excessive use in the Victorian era and in the 1960s and '70s is to blame for their decline. So often, old plants are seen crudely planted in the middle of a lawn, looking lost and out of place.

## Natural plantings

*Cortaderia* have the biggest plume-like panicles of all hardy grasses and form relatively large tussocks or mounds of evergreen, arching foliage which make the most-often-grown selections unsuitable for small gardens, especially as most have reverse-edged, razor-sharp teeth that can cause serious cuts; these are plants to be kept away from path edges and children – handle them with care wearing thick gloves.

Despite these drawbacks, there seems recently to be some renewed interest in pampas grass, partly because a broader selection is now available for gardeners to choose from, in a range of sizes and flowering time – from midsummer through to autumn and winter. Newer, compact cultivars suit smaller gardens: selections such as free-flowering *Cortaderia selloana* 'Evita', which reaches a compact 1.2–1.5m (4–5ft) producing creamy coloured plumes, or *C. selloana* Silver Feather ('Notcort') reaching 1.2m (4ft), with attractive variegated foliage ►

JONATHAN BUCKLEY / THE GARDEN COLLECTION

## TO BURN OR CUT BACK?

Pampas grasses are evergreen, but a thatch of old dead leaves gradually builds up after several years, spoiling the plant's appearance. Cutting back reduces the leaf area that can photosynthesize, which weakens plants and reduces flowering.

In the wild, flash fires sweep across prairies, but in gardens the build up of leaves can create a hotter fire, which may kill some of the clump. Using thick gloves and a strong rake to remove thatch in early spring is the preferred option.

● See also RHS Advice, p696

*Cortaderia richardii*



*C. selloana* 'Aureolineata'



In late summer, *Cortaderia selloana* is used to fine effect in the Mixed Borders at RHS Garden Wisley, seen here with *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude' and pink annual cosmos, backed by the golden foliage of *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea'





‘DURING AUTUMN AND WINTER PAMPAS GRASSES CAN REALLY TAKE CENTRE STAGE’

and silky, cream-coloured plumes.

To replicate the wild habitat of pampas in a garden would be almost impossible, but they do look best among more natural plantings or in scattered informal groups. In the main grass border at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey they sit comfortably with a community of tall *Miscanthus* grasses and pockets of herbaceous perennials. The larger pampas, such as some cultivars of *Cortaderia selloana*, need space to allow them to spread and arch over, almost from the back of a border onto the front row where their distinct habit lends grace to plantings. Pampas grasses are at their best in late summer, perhaps surrounded by large drifts of pink, flat-headed *Eupatorium maculatum* (Atropurpureum Group) ‘Riesenschirm’ and yellow, daisy-like *Helianthus* ‘Lemon Queen’, fringed with a front-row skirt of autumn-toned *Sedum* (Herbstfreude Group) ‘Herbstfreude’.

**Planting associations**

At Great Dixter the late plantsman Christopher Lloyd preferred stronger contrast. I can remember, in October, seeing bright orange and yellow *Kniphofia linearifolia*, 1.2m (4ft) tall, positioned in front of pure white upright plumes of *Cortaderia selloana*

‘Pumila’ in his border. The combination of contrasting flower shapes and colours were outrageously good and worked brilliantly together.

Another beautiful garden, owned by Jennifer Monachon in Guernsey, has a lovely specimen of *Cortaderia richardii*. As the anchor plant it sits adjacent to a streamside planting which suits this New Zealand species. It reaches 2.5m (8ft) tall in bloom, but has a more slender appearance than more-often-seen species, the inflorescence radiating out from the centre of a relatively small clump and swaying in the lightest breeze. The plumes are white with an attractive brassy tint. Adjacent foliage of *Gunnera manicata* and rotund *Darmera peltata* are in scale; when backlit by sun, casting reflective shadows in the koi fish pond below, it really hits the right note.

Similar *C. fulvida* from moist areas

of New Zealand also has arching, one-sided, wand-like plumes, but in tawny beige and reaching 2.4m (8ft).

During autumn and winter pampas grasses can really take centre stage. *Cortaderia selloana* ‘Sunningdale Silver’ is dramatic and statuesque at 3m (10ft) its large, full, silvery plumes atop strong stems and a tall mound of foliage. As good but with smaller foliage and white plumes that twist and turn so effectively on windy days is *C. selloana* ‘Monstrosa’, which reaches 3m (10ft).

Foliage colour is essential in planting schemes; few plants provide a better display than *C. selloana* ‘Aureolineata’. Its leaves have a dramatic longitudinal yellow stripe at the margins which intensifies in colour in winter, while the white, modest-sized plumes reach 1.5m (5ft). It would be interesting to see it interplanted with red-stemmed *Cornus*

*alba* ‘Sibirica’ or white-stemmed *Salix irrorata*. In summer it also blends well with blue *Agapanthus* ‘Loch Hope’, pink *Echinacea purpurea* ‘Magnus’ and other neighbouring grasses.

*Cortaderia* really are among the most noble of grasses and great garden plants. Seen on a winter’s morning they can assume an almost ethereal quality, laden with dew and rimed with frost, at a time when much else is dormant. ■

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**i Suppliers include:**

- Knoll Gardens, Dorset; 01202 873931; [www.knollgardens.co.uk](http://www.knollgardens.co.uk)
- Burncoose Nurseries, Cornwall; 01209 860316; [www.burncoose.co.uk](http://www.burncoose.co.uk)
- Farmyard Nurseries, Carmarthenshire; 01559 363389; [www.farmyardnurseries.co.uk](http://www.farmyardnurseries.co.uk)

PICK OF THE PAMPAS

The RHS Floral Trials Panel selected 32 entries for the *Cortaderia* trial at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey. They are being grown on the Trials Field over a period of three years to assess their potential for the garden and to recommend the Award of Garden Merit to the best.

The main criteria for judging are floriferousness, inflorescence persistence, whether held above foliage (including over winter), colour and form. The trial is ongoing; they were planted in spring 2006 and will remain *in situ* until 2010.

- Notable entries so far:**
- *Cortaderia selloana* ‘Monstrosa’: awesome plant in stature with erect silky plumes from Sept–Jan that bend well in the breeze. 3m (10ft).
  - *C. selloana* ‘Sunningdale Silver’: an old selection that has stood the test of time and is still the best large cultivar for the grandeur and quality of its silvery plumes. 3m (10ft).
  - *C. selloana* ‘Highfield Pink’: an imposing selection with tassel-like plumes of a promising clean shade of pink that are held through to December. 2.5–3m (8–10ft).
  - *C. selloana* ‘Pumila’: a variable range of female plants are grown under this name. The best are compact selections with full, strongly upright inflorescences growing to only 1.2m (4ft). Poor examples can have badly congested foliage.
  - *C. selloana* ‘Patagonia’: excellent selection with glaucous blue foliage.

- Spear-shaped plumes appear from Jun–Oct but can look thin and wispy later in the season. 2.1m (7ft).
- *C. selloana* ‘Aureolineata’: attractively edged foliage and similar to *C. selloana* ‘Gold Band’, which is claimed to be larger, with brighter foliage. Graceful, silvery plumes are carried well above foliage. Mounding to 1m (3ft).
  - *C. selloana* ‘Evita’: compact and free-flowering selection producing clean, cream-coloured flowers that sit high above the foliage from Aug–Sept. Neat habit and suitable for a small garden. 1.2–1.5m (4–5ft).
  - *C. selloana* Silver Feather (‘Notcort’): excellent foliage variegation gives silvery effect. Attractive white stems hold plumes well through winter (Sept–Feb). Suitable for small gardens. 1.2m (4ft).
  - *C. richardii*: New Zealand species which flowers for nearly six months, providing great structure and movement. Nice arching habit with white plumes and a slight brassy tint. 2.5m (8ft). This and *C. fulvida* are rather more slender and open than most *C. selloana* selections.
  - *C. fulvida*: Species producing flowers May–Oct; the yellow stems are attractive against foliage. Plumes white or tawny but can look thin by the latter part of August. 2.5m (8ft).

**@ RHS plant trials information:** Visit [www.rhs.org.uk/trials](http://www.rhs.org.uk/trials) and follow the links via ‘Trials in 2009’ for more on the *Cortaderia* trial

