

Ornamental millets are stunning in the landscape

By Norman Winter

Ornamental millets exploded onto the landscaping scene a little more than five years ago, much to the shock of gardeners everywhere. Everyone was used to seeing millets on vast acreages associated with farms, but could they pass as a landscape plant? The answer has proven to be an unequivocal yes.

Purple Majesty, an All American Gold Medal Selections winner, was the innovator that paved the way for millets to be brought to the landscape. Botanically speaking, these millets are Pennisetum glaucum, closely related to fountain grass, Pennisetum alopecuroides. This species is native to the United States and is grown as an annual. It thrives in our summer heat and produces dark purple leaves topped by equally dark, fruited plumes on plants reaching 4 to 5 feet.

The next varieties that followed were Purple Baron and Jester. Jester is different

as the foliage starts chartruese aging to dark burgundy and is a little shorter at bloom time than Purple Majesty. Purple Baron is more compact than Purple Majesty, reaching about 3 feet in height. The leaves are wider and hold a pleasing green color before eventually turning purple in full sun.

The most talked about millet from last year's trials, however, was Jade Princess. This plant produces electrifying lime green foliage with purple plumes on 4 foot tall plants. It is simply stunning in the landscape and will serve as a terrific backdrop for other seasonal color.

Select a site in full sun for the showiest color. The bed should be fertile, organic-rich and well-drained. Amend the soil if needed with 3 to 4 inches of organic matter and till to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. While preparing the soil, incorporate 2 pounds of a slow-release, 12-6-6 fertilizer per 100 square

feet of bed space. Plant at the same depth they are growing in the container with the crown slightly above the soil profile. Space plants 12 to 16 inches apart.

One of the key considerations to get the maximum beauty of these plants is to transplant to the garden before they get root-bound in the container. This will improve its branching and therefore the number of blooms. Apply a good layer of mulch after planting.

Give a light application of the fertilizer a month after transplanting and again six to eight weeks later. Keep the grass watered during the summer for the best appearance. Avoid letting it dry to the wilting point. The plumes, which are a lot like cattails, are great for use in vases or for drying.

Using the millets effectively in the landscape, however, takes a bold gardener. While most have no problems planting a flat of marigolds or petunias in bold informal

drifts of color, there is a tendency to want to dabble in the millets. Perhaps it is because they are grasses. Think of them the same way you would another annual.

Plant a large stand or drift with a dozen or more plants.

These can serve as a backdrop for your other color or use them in the center of an island bed. When used in either of these styles they will command attention; your visitors will say, "Wow!"

The millets are also well suited to container use. Try planting 3 together as a shocking thriller plant while using a plant like Goldilocks creeping jenny as a spiller and Easy Wave Blue petunia as a filler.

There are a lot of great garden plants to choose from this spring, and the ornamental millets have the ability to make your landscape really sizzle.



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Purple Majesty ornamental millet is a stunning backdrop for the large drift of High Tide Blue ageratum, Salmon Madness Morn petunia and Serena White angelonia.