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## Ornamental millet commands attention

### NORMAN WINTER

McClatchy-Tribune Information Services

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

Purple Majesty, an All America Gold Medal Selections winner, was the innovator that paved the way for millet to be brought to the landscape. Botanically speaking, millet is *Pennisetum glaucum* and closely related to fountain grass, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*. Grown as an annual, it thrives in summer heat and produces dark purple leaves topped by equally dark, fruited plumes on plants reaching 1.2 to 1.5 metres.

The varieties that followed were Purple Baron and Jester. Jester is different as the foliage starts chartreuse 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 a metre. The leaves are wider and hold a pleasing green colour before eventually turning purple in full sun.

The most talked about millet from last year's trials was Jade Princess. It produces electrifying lime green foliage with purple plumes on 1.2-metre plants. It is simply stunning in the landscape and will serve as a terrific backdrop for other seasonal colour.

Select a site in full sun for the showiest colour. The bed should be fertile, organic-rich and well-drained. Plant at the same depth they are growing in the container with the crown slightly above the soil profile. Space plants 30 to 40 centimetres apart.

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 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 millet effectively in the landscape however takes a bold gardener. Plant a large stand or drift with a dozen or more plants. These can be as a backdrop for your other colour or use them in the centre of an island bed.

Millet is also well suited to containers. Try planting three together as a shocking thriller plant with Goldilocks creeping jenny as a spiller and Easy Wave Blue petunia, as a filler.



Norman Winter, McClatchy-Tribune

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