



The Grassy-Eyed Nurseryman: Gerry Kopf

TWG Editor: Anyone who loves ornamental grasses knows Gerry Kopf, owner of *Bald Eagle Nursery* in Fulton, Illinois. Outspoken and wonderfully opinionated, Gerry retired 17 years ago and hasn't had a day off since! He grows hundreds of unusual trees, shrubs and perennials, alongside more than 120 varieties of grasses! His work is resulting in crucial evaluations of the hardiness of the grasses in the Midwest. Indeed, the *Perennial Plant Association* will publish his findings in two years. His energy and enthusiasm are amazing, for Gerry Kopf is 78 years old! [He also has the distinction of publishing the tiniest catalog I receive: it's 68 pages long but the size of a postcard!] Gerry has been a longtime subscriber to *TWG* and a great supporter. One thing about *TWG*: it never lacks opinion! Here's a letter Gerry (pronounced, "Gary") sent after he read the Winter issue:

"Dear Rommy: The format and articles of your Winter 98 Quarterly are on the right track. Excellent! The "panel of experts" idea is close to my heart and contributors such as Mary Ann Leigh [*Timber Ridge Gardens*], with her witty observations, add much to the acceptance of new and better plant introductions.

I did wince, however, while reading landscape architect's Susan Conant's comments about her favorite ornamental grasses. We need to increase her exposure to this world of beauties and the better grasses to look for! For example, our native Little Bluestem [*Schizachyrium scoparium*] is wonderful, but its colors fall far short of new cultivars such as 'The Blues', 'Blaze', and 'Taos'. Susan mentioned Prairie Dropseed [*Sporobolus heterolepis*] but forgot the value of its fragrance! I'd also recommend that she use Feather Reed Grass [*Calamagrostis x acutiflora*] 'Karl Foerster' rather than 'Strictus'. They are quite similar in appearance and performance, but 'Karl Foerster' is the first choice because it is sterile. In my opinion, Feather Reed Grass 'Overdam' is a trickster. Its early beauty and distinctiveness is often lost late in the season when it gets severe rust attacks, particularly in moist areas. It is not a fall beauty at all. Finally, Ms. Conant praised *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus'. I'd recommend that she upgrade to 'Strictus', which is more columnar and definitely hardier!

How excited the public will become when exposed to superior performers. This is the purpose of my nationwide Ornamental Grass Panel [of experts], whose job it is to purge the poor and push the successful grasses. Several *TWG* supporters, such as Roy Klehm [*Klehm Nursery*], Roy Diblik [*Northwind Perennial Farm*], Greg Speichert [*Crystal Palace Perennials*], and Galen Gates [*Chicago Botanic Garden*] are participating. We are entering our fourth year of a five-year project and will release the results through the *Perennial Plant Association* in Spring, 2000. The *PPA* is now funding my project along with Mary Hockenberry Meyer's [*University of MN Landscape Arboretum*] study of seed viability of *Miscanthus* cultivars [note that we are carefully monitoring the invasiveness of early-flowering varieties]. We in the Midwest are so far behind in our knowledge of grasses—perhaps even 25 years behind the Europeans. Hopefully, our study will catch us up and let us soon offer the Midwest the best of the best!

I invite your readers to come see the "Fantasy Trail" of grasses at our nursery, which is located in a Zone 4b pocket of cold in an otherwise Zone 5 region. The grasses bloom all summer but are at a peak in September and October. Please call (815) 589-4121 for directions, more information, or a catalog."

Sincerely, Gerry Kopf

TWG Editor: A few of Mr. Kopf's important tips about growing *Miscanthus* and other warm season grasses will be found on page 6.