



COLLEGIAL LANDSCAPES

Grasses abound in the public realm.

By Rick Darke

LOOKING BEYOND the proverbial garden border, what further roles can grasses play in our shared spaces: our parks,

public gardens, corporate and college campuses, community open space, streetscapes, highways, byways, greenfields, and brownfields? Liv-

able landscapes most often result from a collegial approach to their design and evolution, in which both authority and responsibility are shared among colleagues dedicated to continuous observation and the exploration of possibilities.

When thinking about grasses and our modern shared landscape, there's perhaps no better place to begin than the parking lot. If parking lots are here to stay, then we might as well treat them as gardens. Grasses offer myriad solutions to the typical challenges of parking lot landscapes, since they can withstand

compacted, nutrient-poor, droughty soils, winter winds, and summer heat intensified by reflection from paved surfaces.

A parking lot on the Bard College campus in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, demonstrates the appealing practicality of a mixed planting of local and exotic species that includes *Miscanthus sinensis*, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, *Panicum virgatum*, and *Pennisetum* species. Although the *Miscanthus* and *Pennisetum* species are not native New Yorkers, the growing season in this part of the Hudson River valley is too short for either to produce viable seed that might pose a risk of invasive behavior in local habitats.



A study tour organized by Friends of the High Line in September 2002 reveals an elevated garden of sorts, unlike any other in New York, *right*. Offering intimacy with-in immensity, this unique open space is defined at points by iconic architecture such as the Empire State Building, or by smokestacks, apartment buildings, rail yards, or the Hudson River itself.

Grasses have been and will continue to be essential elements in the flora of the High Line, which is providing a fresh look at the likely origin, evolution, and form of many of our future parks and public gardens. The elevated High Line was built between 1929 and 1934 to separate freight railroad lines on New York City's West Side from the increasing pedestrian and vehicular traffic at grade along 10th Avenue. Railroad activity on the High Line ceased in the 1980s, and since that time a cosmopolitan flora including locally native grasses has established it-



self on the site, which, though truncated, still extends for 1 1/2 miles, or 22 city blocks, and covers nearly 7 acres of open space 18 to 30 feet above street level. The not-for-profit group Friends of the High Line successfully promot-

ed a vision of this space as continuous park, and at the time of this writing the High Line is well on its way to becoming one of Manhattan's most exhilarating linear landscapes. The project has enjoyed enormous and diverse sup-

port, developed in part by the Friends' use of Joel Sternberg's photos of the spontaneous flora of the High Line, which have resonated with innumerable New Yorkers yearning for a bit of open space free of total control.

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The futuristic architecture of the Rain Forest House in Hanover, Germany, *below left*, is matched by the forward-thinking exterior plantings and roof garden designed and executed by German plantsman Hans Simon, who used

his extensive knowledge of grasses and other plants from dry, challenging habitats to construct a planting palette suited to roof conditions.

Pampas grass, *Cortaderia sellowiana* 'Patagonia,' makes the tran-

sition from wall plantings to the Rain Forest House roof.

Below right, Carpathian moor grass, *Sesleria rigida* (left foreground), and hair fescue, *Festuca filiformis* (center and right foreground), are other European species

naturally adapted to dry, nutrient-poor conditions on the roof. Also visible are seedheads of the small yellow onion, *Allium flavum* (at far right), an equally well-adapted species that provided flowering interest earlier in the season.





This urban waterfront park offers spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline.

Gantry Plaza State Park in Long Island City, New York, is a mature example of the use of grasses and sedges in a highly contextual design. This urban waterfront park, designed by Thomas Balsley Associates with Sowinski Sullivan Architects and Lee Weintraub, offers spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline from a site originally built to dispatch railroad cars on barges across the East River. The design is centered around historic former Long Island railroad gantries, which were capable of raising or lowering tracks to meet barges floating on the tidal system that comprises the East River.

The lighted top of the Chrysler Building is evident in this late-January night view of the Manhattan skyline from Gantry Plaza State Park. Locally native switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*, is nestled between granite blocks and rail remnants that reflect the site's history.

Switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*, and woolgrass, *Scirpus cyperinus*, are visible during the daytime.



Grasses have long been present in the “accidental landscapes” that line our highways and byways. A growing worldwide movement is now recognizing their beauty and utility and designing them into the landscapes that accompany our necessary journeys. For a number of years I’ve enjoyed working with colleagues Sue Barton, Gary Schwetz, and the Delaware Department of Transportation on a project titled “Enhancing Delaware Highways.” Over many years of studies, regionally native grasses have proved to be among the most cost-efficient and longest-lived elements in the project’s designed and managed roadside landscapes.

In high-visibility areas such as this location at the junction of interstate highways 95 and 495 en-



tering Delaware, *above*, grasses have been planted in more formally defined patterns. This late-October photo shows switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*, mixed with red-

bud trees, *Cercis canadensis*, and fronted by lower sweeps of blue-stars *Amsonia tabernaemontani* and *A. hubrichtii*.

Panicum virgatum ‘Shenan-

doah,’ selected for its burgundy late-season color evident in this September photo, *below*, fills a narrow median in a northern Delaware suburb.

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An eclectic mix of durable species provides unirrigated multiseason interest.



Photographed in late August, Hans Simon's planting of a traffic circle in Marktheidenfeld, Germany, *above*, relies on an eclectic mix of durable species to provide unirrigated multiseason interest.

The use of grasses and sedges in the restoration and enhancement of regional landscapes extends far beyond the roadside, as evidenced by this dune stabilization project, *left*, in Wellington, New Zealand. The bright orange foliage belongs to pingao, *Desmoschoenus spiralis*, a New Zealand

native sedge that is a natural component of dune vegetation. Many New Zealand dune systems were damaged by poor farming practices, and early twentieth-century attempts to stabilize them typically made use of the exotic marram grass, *Ammophila arenaria*, which is native to Europe and Africa. In addition to its beautiful color, *Desmoschoenus* is preferable because it creates smooth, stable fore dunes as opposed to the steep, blowout-prone dunes formed by *Ammophila*.

Though much of my understanding of grasses and their potential in managed landscapes has come from the close and repeated observation of regional habitats, I owe a considerable debt to the many public gardens worldwide that identify and display the diversity of grasses. In all the years I've studied grasses, one place that has expanded my knowledge and provided inspiration with each visit is the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in Southern California (SBBG), and it is a superb example of a public institution with an inspired, regional focus. SBBG isn't all about grasses—in my opinion, no great garden is—but it does integrate grasses throughout its acres, often in association with California species that might be natural companions in native habitats, and typically in association with plants and other landscape elements that



deserve repetition in any garden seeking to represent the regional beauty of Southern California.

SBBG owes its grassy subtext in many ways to the influence of Di-

rector of Horticulture Carol Bornstein, who has been a consistent voice for the merits of California grasses. Bornstein came to California from Detroit in the early 1980s

and found that her Midwestern awareness of grasses (Michigan is one of the original Prairie states) pointed toward an exploration of California's grasses as a way of developing a point of reference in her newly adopted flora. She envisioned the grasses as a group that could help extend the garden's interest throughout the year.

As we all grow in our awareness of grasses' beauty and utility, I hope there will be more places like SBBG that offer inspired regional examples of grasses in livable landscapes.

Grasses provide continuing interest in the meadow landscape long after the poppies have faded. Blue hues of wild rye meet the mountain colors during a late afternoon at the end of June.

Leymus condensatus 'Canyon Prince' blooms in the meadow in late June.



Adapted from *The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes*, by Rick Darke, to be published by Timber Press in April 2007. Darke is a landscape design consultant and widely published author and photographer focused on regional landscape design.