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# Cooks Current

Newsletter

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## The View from Laughing Springs: Hans Reimann's ecological notes

Spring 2007

### Invasive Ornamental Grasses

The second half of our 2006-2007 winter was very real, not only to us humans, but also to our neighbors in the plant and animal world. Native plants storing energy from ample moisture, lay dormant about ten days longer on average than the last few years. And remarkably, Wood Thrushes, Phoebes and Orioles reappeared at least ten days later than the five-year average. This later migration pattern seemed to assure a plentiful insect food supply because the insects birds need, had host plants, open water and warm ground to help them go through their life cycles. I have introduced the preceding bio-diary, because invasive plant growth was also slowed down due to harsher late winter conditions. Many early, ephemeral and other perennial natives, including tree and shrub seedlings, ferns, grasses and sedges were able to compete for light, water and nutrients on a more even footing. At least for the first thirty days or so, native plants actually gained ground on some invasive plants, but then the invasive attribute of sheer excess bio-mass growth allowed the bad plants to regain their competitive advantage. But what a beautiful window the early spring was to see. In areas I have cleared of invasive plants here at Laughing Springs, the natives continue to put on a theatre of growth unparalleled compared to years past. Among the natives that are thriving this spring are the grasses and sedges. Here at Laughing Springs lives a rabbit, in the woods, who is thriving on native grasses such as *Latiflorae*, a beautiful woodland sedge grass. However, a grass the rabbit won't eat is the annual invasive Japanese Stilt grass (*Microstegium vimineum*). Native woodland alternatives to stiltgrass include creeping phlox, foamflower, and golden star (PA rare).

Other invasive grasses in our area and native alternatives:

Invasive grass - Smooth Brome (*Bromus inermis*) vs Native alternative - Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) ... with thin graceful, colorful stalks and silvery, arched plumes in autumn, one to three foot plants are common if grown in full sun to light shade. Deep, fine textured roots make this species a good erosion control plant with drought tolerance once established. Trimming plants back in spring to just above ground will help new growth.

Invasive Grass - Pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*, *C. jubata*) vs Native Alternative - Sugarcane Plumegrass (*Saccharum* or *Erianthus giganteum*) Able to grow in meadows, open woods and roadsides, this grass is happy in moist, loamy or sandy soils in full sun or light shade, reaching at least eight feet in height and five

feet wide. It is ideal as a hedge, in mixed borders, or as a screen with drought and water logging resistance. As a large grass, this plant will turn from russet to burgundy in autumn.

Invasive Grass - Weeping lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) vs Native Grass Alternative - Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) This grass is a warm season plant that greens up in early summer as a bunchgrass with clumps of narrow, bright green foliage and one-three foot plumes of fragrant flowers. Ornamentally used for its vase-shaped inflorescences and its yellow to orange autumn color. With deep roots suitable for erosion control, it prefers rich moist neutral or acidic soil under sun or light shade.

Invasive Grass - Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) vs Native Grass Alternative - Purpletop (*Tridens flavus*) An early warm season clumping species with broad bright green blades that form a skirt one foot or less above the ground. It has tall, naked stems with open plumes of purple flowers from three-five feet tall. Another deep-rooted grass durable enough for sandy soil in full sun or light shade. Best conditions for growth are moist rich loam.

Invasive Grass - Japanese Silver Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*) vs Native Grass Alternative - Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) a beautiful bunchgrass with ascending tufted foliage and silky golden plumes to six feet tall. Its mature clumps bear many stems and reach out up to three feet. Can be used as a screen, deciduous hedge or accent. It prefers loamy, sandy soils in full sun or light shade. Drought tolerant with red to russet autumn color.

Invasive Grass - Reed Canary Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) vs Native Grass Alternative - Switch Grass (*Panicum virgatum*) a clump forming perennial grass growing three to eight feet tall and four feet wide with airy plumes of small seeds. Spring foliage may be red tinged with russet to red autumn color. Full sun is best, in average to rich moist soil. A great specimen in the garden, switchgrass is widely adaptable to drought/wet conditions. See Previous issue (Winter 2007: Grass Farming for Local Energy) for information concerning switchgrass as an alternative Bio-Fuel.