Ornamental Grasses

In other parts of the country, you know it's fall when the leaves start to change colors. Shades of red, yellow & orange – I'm transported back to the Midwest, where I grew up. While there are some trees in Southeast Louisiana that will give us some fall color, there's something else that I always think about when I think of true fall weather. That is ornamental grasses. When nighttime temperatures begin to drop low enough, your ornamental grasses will start to turn BROWN. Regarding ornamental grasses turning brown, a professor once told me, "Don't forget, brown is a color."

The most popular ornamental grass over the past few years is most definitely the Purple Fountain Grass. It has a unique purple color, stands tall, stays relatively contained, and produces shiny bright plumes. We consider this grass a tender perennial. Meaning that if during the winter months, temperatures get below freezing, purple fountain grass will die down to the roots, and likely not come back. Other ornamental grasses like maiden, muhly & switchgrass are true perennial grasses. They will turn brown in the fall/winter season and come back strong in the spring. Even if it freezes, they will survive at the roots. Despite their differences, any of these annual or perennial grasses can make a nice showing of brown color during the fall and winter. But why would you care about having brown grasses in the landscape?

We're lucky in Louisiana – pansies, petunias, cabbages, kales and snapdragons all grow well during the cool season. There is really no shortage of annual color. On the other side of the coin, your hardy landscape shrubs & tropical plants might look dull. Tropical and perennial plants like ginger, philodendron, lilies, hosta, coral bells & rudbeckia will all turn brown in the fall/winter. They should be cleaned up at that time. Cut back the old brown leaves and add some extra mulch to the bed to help protect the roots from any freezing weather and to help the soil retain some extra moisture. While you've cleaned up those tender perennials and tropical plants, LEAVE those brown looking grasses through the winter. They add some color and texture to an otherwise dull, winter landscape.

In other parts of the country where snowfall is more common, you can imagine that those brown ornamental grasses provide a nice contrast against the white snow. While we don't have that white snow in Louisiana, we have some cloudy days. Or maybe you've got some camellias and sasanquas that are going to bloom in the winter. Brown ornamental grasses will make a nice backdrop for those flowers. Let them be through the winter, and prune them back in early spring, right before they start to grow back.

Have I convinced you yet? Even though there's no shortage of color during the fall and winter months, leave those brown ornamental grasses standing tall this fall and winter – they'll add some texture, whimsy and COLOR to the winter landscape – because BROWN is a color.

Written by John MacMillan