



# Cultivation Notes

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Spring 2002

## Switchgrass

*Panicum virgatum* L.  
by Ann M. Seemann

Family: *Poaceae* (Grass family)

If you have traveled Route 138 along the new highway from the Jamestown Bridge to the Pell Bridge, you will have seen several large plantings of Switchgrass along the low wooden guardrail in the median. If you have traveled along Route 1 near the marinas by Salt Pond, you have seen Switchgrass growing along the metal guardrails for a mile or so—if you get there early before the DOT has cut them down, sadly enough. Another common Rhode Island name for this wonderful grass is Guardrail-grass.

A Rhode Island native, Switchgrass is at home in zones 3-8. It grows in a wide variety of habitats, including open woods, dunes, shores, prairies, and brackish marshes. It is found naturally with other grasses such as Little Bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*. If you're a golfer, take note of the right side of the sixth fairway at the Jamestown Golf Course. Beautiful throughout the year, Switchgrass turns from green to reddish to tan. It stands up well to rain and snow, adding winter interest to the landscape. And it makes an attractive addition to dried bouquets.

*Panicum* has light and airy pyramidal panicles with reddish flowers fading to tan seed heads that are held well above the 3- to 4-foot foliage. Flowers are borne singly, and the seeds are hard and bony. The panicle is twice as long as it is thick.

### Cultivation

*Panicum virgatum* is a tough and adaptable plant that can be grown successfully in somewhat adverse conditions. It enjoys full sun but will tolerate some light shade. It flourishes in either dry or moist conditions and is widespread and abundant throughout Rhode Island. It is a wonderful plant for the home garden. Available cultivars such as 'Heavy Metal' with bluish foliage and 'Haense Herms,' which turns deep red in the fall, are even more distinctive than the species. It is a well-behaved plant, noninvasive, growing in vase-shaped clumps. It makes a handsome backdrop for flowers in the perennial garden and is very impressive growing in graceful sweeps down a bank or in an open area. Birds enjoy the seeds, and in large plantings it serves as wildlife habitat.



Illustration by  
Ann M. Seemann

## Propagation

Propagation is either from seed or by division. Plants are easily grown from seed, which can be collected in the fall. Seed does not require any pretreatment. Sow seed in the spring when the temperature is between 55 and 64 degrees F. Division and transplanting should be done only in the spring. To divide, dig up a clump and slice through it with a sharp knife, then replant the sections, watering as needed. Switchgrass does not need fertilizer and once established, after a year or two, requires virtually no care.

Grow some *Panicum virgatum* in your garden—it will be a favorite!

## References

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- Cox, Jeff. 1991. *Landscaping with Nature*. Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA.
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- Gould, Lisa L., et al. 1998. *Vascular Flora of Rhode Island: A List of Native and Naturalized Plants*. Vol. 1 of *The Biota of Rhode Island*. Rhode Island Natural History Survey, Kingston, RI.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service. 1991. *Conservation Plants for the Northeast*.

## RIWPS Policy

*Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner.  
Take seeds sparingly.*



*Panicum virgatum* growing along guardrail in Jamestown, approaching the Pell Bridge

*Photo by I.W. Cahalan*