



Dear Jonathan

I am planning a new grass section in my garden; please could you recommend a few which would be good for flower arranging too. Many thanks.

Shelley Duncan, Torquay

Well Shelley, living on the glorious English Riviera, you are in the perfect spot for a grass garden. All grasses do extremely well in a salty atmosphere and they will bask in the glorious sunshine that divine Torquay is so famed for. I am a huge fan of grasses and I believe that in a separate garden, as you are creating or mixed amongst herbaceous plants they provide wonderfully contrasting shapes and textures to any garden. If you run out of space they can all be grown in containers and despite the abundance of perennial grasses there is a host of annual grasses which are also brilliant for flower arranging like *Brizia maxima*, *Lagurus ovatus* and *Panicum elegans*. However the perennial grasses are best for all year round garden interest and are least work. I must confess that I have many favourites and may have to reign myself in with my choices – so I am simply going to share my top five perennial grasses

For height and its sculptural feel for any arrangement then I would not be without *Miscanthus giganteus* which grows about 8ft tall – it is self supporting and adds a real wow to both garden and flower arrangement. *Stipa gigantea* is possibly my all time favourite with its amazing wispy golden flowers, that simply glimmer in sunlight. This grass forms a neat clump a little bit like a mini pampas grass and the flowering stems reach a height of 5ft and they air dry beautifully. Next I think I would chose the *Imperata cyndrica rubra*, or Japanese blood grass, which as its name suggests has blood red tipped leaves, making this a welcome addition to many flower designs. Clump forming, self supporting and medium height (around 3ft) is the wonderful cream and green striped foliage of *Miscanthus zebrius*. This grass produces wonderful flowers/ seed heads and is a very elegant grass to cultivate for arranging. My final choice, although do be warned as it does spread freely around is the Pheasant tail grass or *Stipa arundinacea* this delicate wispy grass provides movement and grace to the border and it literally shimmers in the wind. I adore this grass as it produces long delicate flowing flowers that cascade in a pendulous manner, making it wonderful for veiling throughout a floral bouquet or arrangement. This grass looks good grown in a chimney pot or a raised container. Stop it seeding around by cutting the flowers before they dry. It's not a thug but does need management. Well Shelley I hope my answers provide a starting point for a few favourites which will both look good and be useful in your flower designs throughout the year.

Hi Jonathan

I recently saw a flower demonstration where the lady used some glycerined *Garrya elliptica*. I want to have a go; have you ever done it, and how do you go about getting good results.

Yours, Nicola Mackintosh, Thames Ditton

Well Nicola, your question takes me back to my childhood days of helping in a family friends flower shop, where August would always be the time for glycerinating things like beech, bak, *Molucella*, *Acanthus* and a whole host of other fabulous foliage and seed heads. Preserving plant materials with glycerine seems to have gone a little out of fashion, as generally does the techniques of drying and preserving flowers and foliage. I have preserved *Garrya* on many occasions and those lovely dangly catkins look fabulous preserved and go almost black when using glycerine. My tip would be gather the catkins in springtime ideally before the pollen starts to be emitted and condition well overnight in deep water. Remove any foliage and just preserve the branches with the catkins as this will be more successful and take less time (you can always preserve some branches of foliage separately). To do the glycerine solution you need to mix one part glycerine to two parts water, place it in a pan and stir continually as you heat up the liquid to just under boiling point. I then always let the liquid cool down a little before placing the stem ends of the plant material into a jug of the solution and leave it to slowly drink the glycerine. You will see after some days the catkins turning colour and when they are almost completely changed, I then lift them out of the container, bunch them and suspend them so that the solution can drip through right to the tips of the catkins thus ensuring all parts are fully preserved.

If you love *Garrya*, Nicola then why not also grow and then later preserve the even longer catkins of the *Itea ilicifolia*. This evergreen shrub is best grown against a wall and in August it produces a cascading sea of lime green tassels. Just like *Garrya* these preserve perfectly by using the same method and why not also preserve the tassels of the annual *Amaranthus* or Love-lies-bleeding. All of these things are perfect for flower arranging and with Christmas speedily approaching they then look fabulous glitter sprayed too.
Happy preserving!



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