

GrowerTalks[®]

July 2004

M A G A Z I N E • Since 1937

**Onboard the
Home Depot Bus (p. 64)**

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**New Grasses
from Down Under (p. 91)**

A photograph of a nursery or greenhouse. In the foreground, a hand holds a silver coin (a dime) next to a large, vibrant pink flower. The flower has five petals and a yellow center. The background shows other plants and signs, including one that says "NEW" and another that says "TITAN™ Peach".

Pack Trials 2004
**CHANGE FOR
THE BETTER**
(p. 34)

Grass from by HELEN MOODY DOWN UNDER

With selective breeding, Australian “grasses” are making their way to North America, promising a new drought-tolerant alternative

In the last few years in Australia there's been a distinct move away from flowering plants to varieties where foliage and form are the main features. Drought and water restrictions have encouraged a wider use of drought-tolerant plants; garden size and gardening time are shrinking; and today's gardeners want low-maintenance, easy-care plants. And then there's fashion—plants with year-round good looks, distinct form and structure are all the rage. Vibrant tropical foliage, grasses and “grass-like” or “strappy-leaved” plants are increasingly in vogue, especially with the professional landscape and design community. And where there are designers, gardeners aren't far behind.

Todd Layt, an Australian nurseryman specializing in turf grasses, ornamental grasses and grass-like or strappy-leaved plants, decided to embark upon a breeding program. His aim: To select and trial plants for improved performance; lower maintenance; superior looks, including shape, tidiness, compactness, color and toughness; and disease resistance, especially to phytophthora. He also wanted compact, low-maintenance plants for public landscapes that look good 12 months of the year, for 10 to 30 years.

His efforts have culminated in Ozbreed Pty Ltd., which breeds and markets these types of plants throughout Australia and overseas. The majority of Ozbreed plants have both plant breeder rights and trademarks. They've released 13 grass-like varieties, including nine “improved” native grasses. Many have



Photos courtesy of VersaScapes

Dianella revolute Little Rev



A new generation of strappy-leaved plants emerges. *Lomandra Breeze* made its debut in the U.S. this year after three years of trials that proved it could handle temperature extremes. Besides its landscape performance, it also makes great filler for cut flower arrangements.

become so popular that Todd says the biggest problem has been keeping up supply the first year after plants are released. Another 10 strappy-leaved cultivars will be released in the next few years.

The first of the new generation strappy-leaved plants, *Lomandra longifolia* Tanika (renamed Breeze in the United States), has been available in Australia for about a year. Todd says, “I took one of the toughest Australian plants, which was too big and coarse and spiky, and made it look constantly good with fine, non-spiky leaves. ...Designers are using it instead of liriopse.” Growing 20 to 24 in. tall—the species, in contrast, reaches 5 ft.—Breeze tolerates full sun and shade and stays green year-round even in cold climates. It's more resistant to root rot than the species, and it can be grown with or without irrigation.

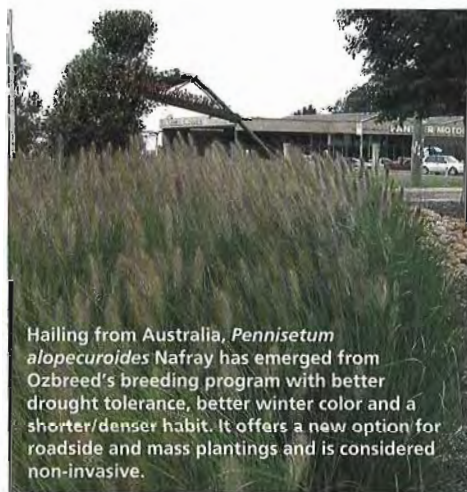
Going North

Ozbreed has begun to focus on export, believing these Australian native plants will plug a gap in the northern hemisphere. Todd's U.S. link is VersaScapes in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, a marketing and licensing company with links to turf grass company Sod Solutions. They've trialed Breeze in numerous locations for three years and found it handled temperature extremes. Todd believes the plant has potential for the cut foliage market too, as the fine, soft leaves make a good filler with a long vase life. ▶

Grasses

At the end of 2003, VersaScape delivered a test-market batch of 30,000 plants to 10 growers for spring sales. So far, so good, says VersaScape Owner and President Toby Wagner. "We've gone as fast as we can go." To date, they've licensed more than 30 growers and have four tissue labs quickly expanding their offerings.

Ozbreed has also focused on breeding improved forms of dianella, a tough, drought-tolerant Australian native with attractive blue-green flax-like foliage and purple berries. A range of these is also being marketed in the U.S. VersaScape has four cultivars currently on the market, with more waiting in the wings. The plants are propagated via tissue culture and sold as bareroot and rooted plugs.



Hailing from Australia, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* Nafray has emerged from Ozbreed's breeding program with better drought tolerance, better winter color and a shorter/denser habit. It offers a new option for roadside and mass plantings and is considered non-invasive.



Dianella caerulea Nafray

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VersaScape is also marketing another of Ozbreed's success stories: pennisetum (the only true ornamental grass of the group). While native *Pennisetum alopecuroides* grow too tall for most landscaping applications (and are considered invasive weeds), *P. alopecuroides* Nafray is shorter, denser and finer textured, with better winter color than the species. It's drought tolerant, has a good height for mass plantings and is excellent at crowding out weeds.

VersaScape (www.versascapes.com) is marketing this collection in the U.S. under Celebrated Plants. Toby stresses that most of the selections only look like ornamental grasses; but since they aren't, you can use herbicides for weed control.

The slogan on the Celebrated Plants' tags: "Low to no irrigation." Particularly for the Southern market, where VersaScape is concentrating a lot of its efforts right now, the collection gives growers a new way to entice consumers interested in drought tolerance and low maintenance. ■

Helen Moody is a freelance journalist and horticulture consultant.