

Beyond the Mower

Written by Will Balk, Jr.

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If you can get beyond the two-and-a-half inch high expanse of meticulously maintained lawn; if you can think more widely than St. Augustine, Bermuda, or Zoysia; if you can avoid being distracted by that substance still illegal in our state, although beloved by many; then open your mind to the vast family of grasses – especially native ones – suitable for use in the garden and in the landscape.

We are all familiar by now with this non-lawn use of grasses and their grass-like cohort, thanks in large part to the 20th Century designers Oehme, van Sweden, and Oudolph.

The new plantings in the median of the Boundary Street redesign employ a number of strikingly handsome grasses. Perhaps the most striking – and maybe the most-used – is the needle-thin-leaved sweetgrass, *Muhlenbergia*.

The plant trade uses various species names and varietal names for this native (*M. capillaris*; *M. filipes*; *M. capillaris* var. *filipes*; *M. sericea*), but it's most frequently just called 'muhly,' pronounced "mule-ly." Muhly grass (above) is most spectacular in the fall when it sends up great frothy masses of gossamer pink or white bloom, which glow with brilliant light when the sun is just right.

Muhly grass is so spectacular that it risks becoming too common, I fear, used and overused sometimes in situations which fail to take advantage of its great usefulness and beauty. It looks great in the Boundary Street median.

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