



[Back to article](#)

## Mr. Grass and the Amazing Encyclopedia of Perennials

by Mary Jasch - October 30, 2006

Plantsman Kurt Bluemel has added another notch on his horticultural belt as contributing editor of the American Horticultural Society's *Encyclopedia of Perennials* (DK Publishing).

At 496 pages, the book is the ultimate resource on herbaceous perennials and is testimony to scholarly teamwork.

The *Encyclopedia of Perennials* is the first book of its kind and magnitude in this country. It offers practical advice from internationally-renowned professionals on choosing, planting, growing, and designing with over 5,000 taxa of herbaceous perennials, including grasses.

For instance, only a plantsperson would know that when the blackish *Geranium phaeum* is planted in shade behind the shorter chartreuse *Euphorbia amygdaloi*, both plants turn their flowers to the sun in dramatic harmony. Both are great groundcover and the Euphorbia is evergreen. Wow. What a sidebar! That alone is worth the price of admission.

With plantsman and garden author, editor-in-chief, Graham Rice, Bluemel engaged associates from the Perennial Plant Association (PPA) to help research, review the text and photos, and write sidebars. The team of American gardening experts included Dr. Steven Still, Dr. Laura Deeter of Ohio State University, and Denise Adams. "It was a concerted effort, but I carried the responsibility," says Bluemel.

One difficulty in doing such a book lies within the very nature of the horticulture industry -- perpetual hybridization. Often, by the time a book makes it off the press and into stores, new plants are on the market and others have disappeared. Also, many plants featured in books are hard to find.

But not so with *Encyclopedia of Perennials*.

Editors selected perennials of quality and endurance, new plants that are expected to endure, plants with long-term availability, hard-to-find noteworthies that should be made more available, and obscure gems that need to be brought to light.

The A to Z Directory, arranged by genus name, includes scientific and common names, full descriptions of cultivation, propagation, problems, and cultivars, color photography, and informative sidebars about plant history, flower structure, and design tips, many on companion planting.

Take Geranium -- the species and successful cultivars remain standard offerings to the American public. "Geraniums are durable for the Mid-Atlantic and northeast climate with different and valuable plants for all seasons," says Bluemel. "My perennial career spans 50 years and a lot of the non-cultivars are as good as 50 years ago."

The *Encyclopedia* devotes 18 pages and 57 photos to Geraniums. Sidebars include specific advice on what plants to mix for hot color, which are useful ground cover, flower structure, hybridization, long-flowering cultivars, staking, geranium people, wild relatives, which to choose for foliage, dark-leaved variants, and "When in doubt, plant a geranium." A gardener could create a landscape of geraniums! "Nomenclature is in constant change. You'll hear names like you've never heard before." - Bluemel

All plant names were taken from the British Plant Finder.

"The names are not necessarily accepted in this country, the names of the anemones," Bluemel explains. "Sedums and chrysanthemums have many names. Now the asters are very segmented. There's constant flux. Nothing is written in granite. Nomenclature is an ongoing thing. But you have to subscribe to

something and have to adhere to it. I've learned so much doing this book."

Turning pages slowly... My goodness... *Polygonum cuspidatum* is now *Fallopia japonica*? Or, was it always? Admirably, although the noxious knotweed is represented here, editors recommend not planting it because of "its spectacularly invasive habit."

One fun feature, long-awaited by Mid-Atlantic gardeners who live with tropical-like summers, is the Heat-Zone Map developed by the AHS. Its 12 zones each indicate how many days per year exceed 85 degrees F. Check it out on the web at [www.ahs.org](http://www.ahs.org).

DIG IT! Territory falls mostly within Zones 4 and 5 (30-45 days over 85 degrees F) with just one location in the Catskills in Zone 1 (one day over 85 degrees F) and a few spots on the south Jersey/eastern Pennsylvania border in Zone 7 (60-90 days over 85 degrees F). No wonder petunias get shriveled and sticky in August!

If you're in a hurry to find out what Heat-Zone you live in, [go to this page](#), type in your zip code and the database will tell you what Heat-Zone you live in.

The book includes an *Index of Common Names*, a list of *Potentially Harmful Perennials*, and Internet resources.

So who is Kurt Bluemel, anyway?

Plant lover. Explorer. Botanist. Breeder. Designer. Businessman. Let him speak a word for perennials.

Educated in Germany and Switzerland, Bluemel worked for ten years in European nurseries with one eight-year stint at a Swiss nursery that offered a catalog of 6,000 taxa consisting of perennials and rock garden plants, and a design/build landscaping company. "When I was a young man," he says, "when I saw two Nobel Laureates crawling through the nursery, I thought, 'They must be seeing something that I'm not.'"

Bluemel was fascinated by the diversity of perennials and the never-ending learning process.

"Perennials populate the entire world, both the Northern and the Southern hemispheres. In Europe, landscaping is different. There, a lawn doesn't take as much space and also the intensity of gardening is stronger. In Switzerland, the diversity of landscaping is great and perennials play a large role."

Bluemel's botanical passion called him to explore South America, Africa, and other exotic lands for plants. In the 1960s, he moved to the U.S., bringing flowers and grasses with him. "I was very instrumental in bringing grasses and perennials into this country," says Mr. Grass, as he is known in certain circles. "Among all the perennials were the ornamental grasses from Europe - maybe 75 new grasses from Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavia, Siberia, Central Asia. In the 1960s, few nurseries had grasses. In Europe, it's a self-understood thing that grasses belong in the garden."

Bluemel opened Kurt Bluemel, Inc., nursery and design/build company, in Maryland in 1964. He uses a broad palette of perennials and grasses, especially in the Mid-Atlantic area. His work encompasses the savannah at Disney World's Animal Kingdom, Busch Gardens, and in California -- even corporate New Jersey.

In 1997 he joined the board of the AHS. "They asked me if I would be interested in editing and helping put together this book on perennials. I had a lot of experience in growing plants in nurseries and using plants in landscapes." Bluemel is currently doing a 4.5-acre perennial meadow for the American Horticultural Society.

"I'm partial to perennials. Perennials are the tools to have when you want to create a multi-season landscape with something different in bloom. Instead of having just 12 months, you can have a lot of different dates with something different blooming from January through December. You have to have an entire system from shade trees and conifers, flowering shrubs to perennials and bulbs, for a complete garden."

No doubt about it, give yourself the gift of this book. Grab it, curl up, get comfy, start planning. The *Encyclopedia of Perennials* will give you winters of pleasure. While you're at it, give one to your favorite gardener. You can't miss.

To buy the book:  
American Horticultural Society [www.ahs.org](http://www.ahs.org)