

**From GardenRant.com**

## **Kurt Bluemel - Mr. Grass or Mr. Perennial?**



Sure, [Kurt Bluemel](#) has been called Mr. Grass for introducing ornamental grasses to the U.S., but he's also credited with popularizing perennials here and actually introducing such gems as sedums and Lenten roses to the U.S., so what to call him? I call this Czech nurseryman a big poobah of the gardening world. After all, could the super-famous landscape architects [Oehme](#), [van Sweden](#) have started the New American Garden movement here without Kurt to choose, grow and supply the perennials and grasses that made them so famous? Heck, no. At least that's what one of his devoted staffers told me and who am I to argue?

### WHAT ELSE?

- He's been growing plants and designing landscapes professionally for, oh, 45 years now. His projects range the major thoroughfares in Washington, D.C. to the gargantuan landscape that is Walt Disney Resort.
- [His Maryland nursery](#) is the largest supplier of ornamental grasses in the U.S. and grows about 700 types. Nearby [Earthly Pursuits](#), run by his sister, is the retail outlet for his plants.
- On the board of the American Horticultural Society, he donated plants and labor to create their [5-acre meadow](#). His old friend "Wolfie" Oehme partnered with him again on this project.
- Co-authored (with Graham Rice) the AHS's Encyclopedia of Perennials. (over there in our right sidebar).

### RUNNING AN INTERNATIONAL HORT HUB

Kurt long ago started recruiting top horticulturists from Europe to run his nursery - becau



se they were already experienced in growing these plants - so Americans wanting to further their education flock to the nursery to learn from the masters. Americans like [NPR's Ketzell Levine](#), [Green Roof Plants' Ed Snodgrass](#), and the [Smithsonian's Janet Draper](#). Janet told me she worked for Kurt fresh out of Purdue, on the recommendation of her mentor at Mt Cuba. "Boy, did I get training, along with LOTS of HARD physical labor, which is normal for production nurseries. I have tremendous respect for anyone in nursery production." And Janet noted that "Kurt brought us all together."

#### LAWN REPLACEMENT ADVICE

Asked what he would recommend to replace lawn, Kurt suggests, for a typical 1/2-acre lot, a low woodland garden of redbuds, small trees, walkways, and native groundcover, including lots of ferns. Sounds heavenly to me. Woodland gardens have fewer weeds and need less watering.

But what about meadows, like the one he installed for the AHS at their River Farm headquarters? Asked if he's part of the new "meadow movement," Kurt demurred, throwing out this intriguing line: "Ever since being drafted into the Hitler Youth Movement, I'm not much on joining." If only I'd had time for the whole Kurt Bluemel story. Maybe as a fly on the wall next time he and his pals sit down with for some good French wine.

#### WHAT HE RANTS ABOUT

And relevant to our mission here, Kurt has at least two good rants in him - about zoning that mandates lawns and about the Big Box stores ruining independent retail nurseries. He's welcome to guest-post here anytime.

Many thanks to Kurt for taking the time to sit down with me recently. And readers, click "continue reading" for a short photo array of his garden and nursery.





Posted by Susan Harris on October 07, 2008 at 05:13 AM