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Super silky grass

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By Val Bourne

One famous garden writer, Helen Yemm, wrote a book called *Gardening in my Nightie*. I think I should pen a tome called *Gardening in my Witch's Hat* because this year I have been summoning up the spirits to make things flower! If I had occult powers I think I'd pick the garden up and head south where the roses and penstemons re-bloom reliably and where the pampas grass is out in late August or early September.

As I peer from my first-floor study I can see the feathery plumes of my pampas grass, or cortaderia, just emerging and showing a tantalising glimpse of silky feather. Yet those on the RHS Wisley trial field in sunny Surrey have been in full flow for weeks. I grow a variegated small pampas grass called *Cortaderia selloana* 'Silver Feather' with a vertical bar-code pattern of pale-yellow and light-green stripes. It provides a fountain of light relief on dull days and effervescent sparkle when the sun shines.

'Silver Feather' only reaches 1.2 m (about 4ft) and the neat foliage splays out and curls slightly at the tips. It does not seem to suffer the fate of many larger cortaderias which fray and brown at the edges. As winter descends, the feathery awns take on a silvery sheen in low light and the flower heads are graceful enough to move and sway with elegance. So many pampas flower heads stay bolt upright and stock still like loud exclamation marks.

There are 24 species. Most are found in South America but there are four New Zealand species plus another in New Guinea. The most commonly grown is pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*), a native of Brazil, Argentina and Chile. The species was named in honour of the botanist and naturalist Friedrich Sellow (1789-1831) who studied and collected the flora of Brazil. Pampas grass enjoys moist, humid winters and hot, dry summers in open, windy positions in its native setting.

This Victorian favourite was championed and planted by William Robinson (1838-1935) at Gravetye Manor in Sussex. Known to him as *Gynerium argenteum*, he first saw it growing at the Glasnevin Botanic Garden in Dublin while working there as a trainee gardener. Glasnevin had introduced the grass in 1840 and Robinson, who summed it up as "noble, distinct and beautiful" went on to use it at Regents Park in London – his next post.

'Pumila' is a compact, metre-high grey-green form which bears lots of dense plumes packed together – giving it a certain sky rocket appeal. 'Patagonia', an American selection introduced by Kurt Bluemel, is more cold-tolerant with airier plumes as is 'Andes Silver' – also from Bluemel. 'Sunningdale Silver' is a tall variegated pampas with full plumes on stout stems. This flamboyant older variety, associated with Graham Stuart Thomas, resists the weather well.

There is an earlier flowering New Zealand species called *C. richardii* (see Looking Good) and it's commonly called toetoe. It holds its airy, one-sided plumes way above the foliage and this elegant grass, which enjoys moist conditions in its native habitat, looks magnificent from June onwards.

Mine has not flowered yet and Halloween may come early so watch out frogs, newts and adders!

(Notcutts introduced and sell 'Silver Feather'.)

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