

## Giant Reed Grass –Garden Worthy Corn

For much of the East Coast, I would have to say that sweet corn is a major staple of mid-summer. Rutgers Gardens has a weekly Farm Market and sweet corn is the primary ‘carrot’ that attracts customers in August. As a plant, corn also has a rather awkward yet whimsical upright habit that is clothed with large floppy leaves and a tassel of flowers for a hat! The major ornamental issue with corn is its tendency to rapidly decline once the fruit has ripened. Fortunately, there is a solution! I was recently walking with a student and when we came up to *Arundo donax*, the Giant Reed Grass, his first comment was how much it resembled corn – really big corn!

*Arundo donax* is in fact one of the largest and tallest of the ornamental grasses. Native to regions around the Mediterranean, it can reach heights nearing 20 feet in a tropical location and a more restrained 14-16’ in temperate climates. Giant Reed Grass was originally described by Linnaeus and the name *Arundo* means reed or cane, while *Donax* appears to come from the Greek referring to a specific type of reed. In Greece and elsewhere it has long been used as a source of reeds for musical instruments. It has also been used in the making of baskets, mats, high quality paper and in the production of wattle, a woven fabrication of stems, reeds and leaves used in the building of homes and other structures. It was even used as a measuring rod and is referenced as such in the Bible!

Obviously, *Arundo donax* has proved numerous economic and social benefits through the millennia. The one downfall is its invasive nature when grown in moist areas throughout tropical or frost free locations. In temperate regions, especially in the more northerly regions of its hardiness range of zone 6, it is a very well-behaved and is a garden worthy plant. From my experiences, the thick, fleshy roots spread about 6-8” a year. Although the plants appreciate moist soils, and will event tolerate short periods of inundation, they grow very well in average garden soils. The one requirement is a full day of sun.

For the garden, Giant Reed Grass has numerous benefits, the most obvious being its strong vertical and corn-like appearance. It provides a great exclamation mark, easily reaching 8 feet by late June and 14 feet by September. The leaves are large, usually 2” wide and up to 20” long and appear in two opposing rows on the stem. Visually, they provide an attractive coarse texture but they also have auditory benefits; they create dramatic rustlings sounds with the slightest of breezes, often a benefit if the garden is to muffle or disguise ambient street and highway noise. The plants also have the benefit of providing screening throughout much of the summer and fall. Based upon the depth of the planted area, this grass can serve as a filtered screen, allowing glimpse of the adjacent area, or a dense and complete screen. In Southern California, the plants were initially planted by French settlers to serve as an inexpensive windscreen! *Arundo donax* ‘*Variegata*’ is a white variegated form which only reaches 8’ in a growing season. The variegation looks great when combined with white flowering shrubs or shorter plants with white variegation. The one problem I have encountered with ‘*Variegata*’ is the fading of the white markings during the heat of late summer. The variegation remains on the newer foliage towards the top of the stems, but fades from the older, lower leaves. ‘*Golden Chain*’ has chartreuse variegated leaves and only reaches 6’ tall.

Giant Reed Grass may not initially appeal to everyone. However, as you begin to consider the whimsy and fun that it brings to the Garden, along with a bit of musical lore, the merits of this large corn-like plant are sure to win you over!