

## The Weekly Plant

27 July 2014

**Common names:** deer grass, meadow muhly, deer muhly

**Scientific name:** *Muhlenbergia rigens*<sup>1</sup>

**TAV location:** Villa grounds, along the walk just west of the building

### Discussion

I've already proclaimed my love of grasses. Several have been featured in Weekly Plant, natives you might find along our trails or popping up unexpectedly in your yard. This week's grass is a landscape plant, seen in many commercial landscapes as well as in home gardens. It's large, up to 5' x 5', acting almost as a shrub in the landscape.

The common name of this plant confused me at first, since most references state it is unpalatable to deer. Turns out, deer grass is excellent cover for mule deer during fawning. It is also used as cover by other animals, including ladybugs. In winter, these animals and the seeds of deer grass provide food for many birds. In spring, the new tender shoots are eaten by deer and other animals, including the caterpillars of several butterfly species. Humans used this plant, too, grinding the seeds to make mush and bread. In California deer grass was an important fiber in basket making. The native tribes cultivated this species, burning it each year to remove dead leaves and encourage abundant new growth.

Deer grass is native to Arizona and surrounding states. It is usually found in valley grasslands or along streams, at elevation of about 3,000-7,500 ft. In the landscape, water it once or twice a month in hot weather to keep it looking lush. Like all grasses, its roots excel at preventing erosion.



Deer grass has a weeping or fountain shape, with slender flower stalks held above the leaves. The leaves and flower stalks form a large, dense mass that turns a grayish straw color as winter approaches. While this can provide winter interest, this dense mass also impedes the growth of new shoots in spring. Every reference I read said to cut this grass back fairly low in spring before new growth begins, at least every 3 years and possibly every year. Some authorities said cut back to 6", some said to 3". Cutting to the ground was mentioned, as was mowing and burning and raking the plant after cutting to remove dead stems.

Unfortunately, in a commercial landscape, this grass is often cut back to 24-30". When this is done, the new stems, which must grow from ground level, can barely find their way to the sun. The plant is left looking sparse, with a large mass of dead stems in the center. It will take some work, but cutting this grass down low every year or two will reward you with lush new growth and a landscape-worthy plant.

<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.

*The very top: This deer grass plant was not cut back low. However, the dead stems are not very dense, so there are many new leaves showing the characteristic "fountain" form and good flower development. Left: The long but narrow flower stalk, less than 1/2" wide. Right: A deer grass plant that has been cut back tall for several years. The old, dead stems are very dense and impede the new growth. Is this a look you would want in your home landscape? (photo taken at Del Lago)*



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey