

## Kurt Bluemel Nursery: Perennials for American Gardens

by Carole Ottesen

THE PAST 40 years have witnessed tremendous changes in the way Americans garden. Perhaps the most significant new trend to emerge has been the vastly increased use of herbaceous perennials and ornamental grasses.

One of the leading forces behind the growing popularity and diversity of perennial plants, especially in the Mid Atlantic region, has been nurseryman **Kurt Bluemel**. His wholesale nursery, Kurt Bluemel, Inc., located in Baldwin, Maryland, grows a staggering variety of perennials in even more staggering numbers to supply retail nurseries and major landscaping projects throughout North America. Bluemel's nursery has supplied plants for such diverse clients as the **Animal Kingdom at Walt Disney World Resort** in Orlando, Florida, and a meadow at the headquarters of **Becton, Dickinson and Company**, a medical technology company headquartered in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey. (The nursery's retail arm, **Earthly Pursuits**, [www.earthlypursuits.com](http://www.earthlypursuits.com), is managed by Bluemel's sister, **Monika Burwell**.)

Among the nursery's offerings are so many different kinds of ornamental grasses—some 700 selections—that Bluemel is known as “Mr. Grass” in some circles. “Directing his unique energies and knowledge to what was an obscure group of plants, Kurt Bluemel literally put a face on ornamental grasses for innumerable American gardeners, nursery professionals, and landscape architects,” says garden writer and photographer **Rick Darke**, whose books include *The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses* (Timber Press, 1999). “A demanding yet generous mentor to so many, Kurt reached across oceans and continents to

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Japanese blood grass is one of the plants Kurt Bluemel introduced to American gardeners.

assemble his palette, and the Kurt Bluemel catalog became the Bible.”

### FILLING A GARDEN VOID

When Bluemel emigrated to the United States from Europe over 40 years ago, many of the perennials and grasses he was familiar with there were impossible to find. “There was an obvious void—not just in grasses, but in herbaceous perennials,” he recalls. “One of the plants I brought from Europe was *Helleborus orientalis*,” the Lenten rose, which Bluemel says, was then relatively unknown.

The availability of new and different perennials inspired American landscape designers and gardeners, who began integrating these plants in lavish quantities as exciting new ground covers. Increasing sophistication, in turn, fueled a demand for even more of the new and different. Many of the plants once considered unusual or exotic—including ornamental grasses, sedums, and hellebores—have become a standard part of the American perennial plant palette.

“I think my contribution as a person and through my nursery was to help open up a whole new avenue of thinking about perennials and how to use them in the garden,” says Bluemel.

### A GROWING RELATIONSHIP

Bluemel served as chair of the AHS Board of Directors from 2002 to 2004 and remains on the Board as past chair. In addition, he has created an enduring natural legacy at AHS's River Farm headquarters by designing a meadow and donating more than 100,000 plants to stock it. The second phase of the André M. Bluemel Meadow, named in memory of Kurt's son, is being planted this spring. “Kurt's gift will be enjoyed by generations of visitors to River Farm,” says AHS Director of Horticultural Programs **Tom Underwood**.

Bluemel's support of AHS is fueled by his commitment to the Society's mission and educational programs. “AHS has a tremendous future under the leadership of our president, **Katy Moss Warner**,” says Bluemel. One of AHS's great strengths, he feels, is its Board, which combines the experience, passion, and skills of national horticulture industry leaders and avid gardeners. “Having that kind of leadership allows board members to combine their strengths and achieve greater results,” he adds.

These are the kind of qualities, Bluemel says, that make it worthwhile for him to support AHS on both a personal and a company level. Corporate partnerships, he says, “offer a much greater opportunity to get our mission across—to educate and make more garden-loving people.” And, he adds, “in the long run, support for AHS benefits the companies as well.”

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