

## Hughie Jones - Nov 2015

Feather Reed Grass - *the wind catcher*  
*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Overdam' and 'Avalanche'  
Poaceae: Genera 675; Species 10,000

The grass family (*Poaceae*) is cosmopolitan, ranging from the polar circle to the equator and from mountain summits to the sea. One of the two flowering plants on Antarctica is a grass (*Deschampsia antarctica*).

With drought and temperatures on the rise, it is good to know that the warm season grasses (those that start to grow in early summer and flower in fall) have the C4 pathway. This allows them to take in more carbon and store it rather than opening their pores during times of extreme heat or drought.

C4 pathway plants arose around 25 to 32 million years ago during the Oligocene and did not become ecologically significant until around 6 to 7 million years ago in the Miocene period. Today these plants represent about 5% of Earth's plant biomass and 3% of its known plant species. Despite this scarcity, they account for about 30% of terrestrial carbon fixation. Increasing the proportion of these plants could be an important climate change avoidance strategy.

There are about 260 species of reed grass (*Calamagrostis*) mostly occurring in temperate regions of the world. Eight have been identified in British Columbia. The ornamental feather reed grass isn't a C4 pathway plant but this cool season grass has something special.

It catches the wind like no other grass. Even when the air is still and everything in your garden seems suspended, feather reed grass moves. Grasses are wind pollinated, so it isn't surprising that they are fine tuned to detect motion.

*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Overdam' and 'Avalanche' stay attractive through the seasons, unlike many cool season ornamental grasses. And you don't have to wait for their appearance like the warm season grasses. They are both variegated cultivars with a beautiful form, much more relaxed than 'Karl Forster', which appears strict and upright. Both will grow in partial shade too.

Feather reed grass is not difficult or time consuming to grow. Being a clumper, it is not invasive. And if your clump gets too big, there is no problem dividing it - not a chainsaw grass or back wrecker.

Sources: Gardening with Grasses - King and Oudolf; Plants in Coastal British Columbia - Pojar and Mackinnon; Flowering Plant Families of the World - Heywood, Brummitt, Culham, Seberg; C3 and C4 Native Grasses - NSW Department of Primary Industries  
[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/C4\\_carbon\\_fixation](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/C4_carbon_fixation);



These are pictures of 'Overdam' from my garden in early summer. You can see the gentle form is easy to place in a garden.



The variegation also is easy on the eye. The leaves are white and green with touches of pink. 'Avalanche' is very similar, just slightly more cascading in form.