

Hughie Jones – Dec 2010

### A Japanese Plant

Hakone grass, urahagusa  
*Hakonechloa macra*  
The Grass Family (*Poaceae*)

Prior to the opening of the Sea of Japan some 15 million years ago, the islands that now make up Japan were part of the Asian mainland. Japan's flora has come mostly from east-central China, Korea, and the islands and mainland to the north, whereas Taiwan's came from the Philippines and southeastern China.

Some of Japan's notable plants are rare, endemic species that are well-known favourites in gardens, both in Japan and around the world in temperate climates. Urahagusa (*Hakonechloa macra*) is one of these plants.

It is always exciting to see a plant that you grow in its native habitat. You don't have to be there – a picture will do too. When you see a plant growing naturally, you learn a lot about how it likes to grow and be placed. I couldn't find any picture of Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra*) growing in the wild no matter how much I searched. The same thing happened when I was researching another Japanese native, yellow wax bells (*Kirengeshoma palmata*).

I guess that is because Hakone grass, like yellow wax bells, is rare in its native habitat, the Kii Peninsula. Both plants according to IUCN Red List categorization are 'critically endangered'. They face an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future.

But there could be another reason. There is a special magic to the Kii Peninsula – this is an area where the gods have been enshrined since the age of myths and legend in Japan. Perhaps the gods are hiding the remaining rare plants.

The Kii Peninsula with its sacred sites and pilgrimage routes is located south of Nara and Kyoto. Nara and Kyoto were former centers of the Japanese cultural and political scene for a total period of some 1400 years. The Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples of the Kii Mountains are a unique fusion between Shintoism and Buddhism. In fact, the Kii Peninsula is the location of a UNESCO World Heritage Site: Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range.

I had hoped to see a picture of Hakone grass growing in its native habitat - wet, rocky cliffs in the mountains of Honshu. The Kii Mountain Range is an area filled with dark forests, numerous waterfalls, and steep cliffs – a perfect place for Hakone grass.



Kii Peninsula - UNESCO World Sacred Heritage Site - home of Hakone grass

Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra*) is a slow spreader with graceful, arching stems forming loose, cascading mounds 30 – 90 cm tall (1 – 3 ft). The soft foliage is rich green and bamboo-like. The mid-to-late summer inflorescences appear between the leaves and are subtly attractive. Although Hakone grass is a warm season grass, it requires a cool, moist environment similar to its native habitat for best growth. It turns exquisite copper-orange tones in autumn.

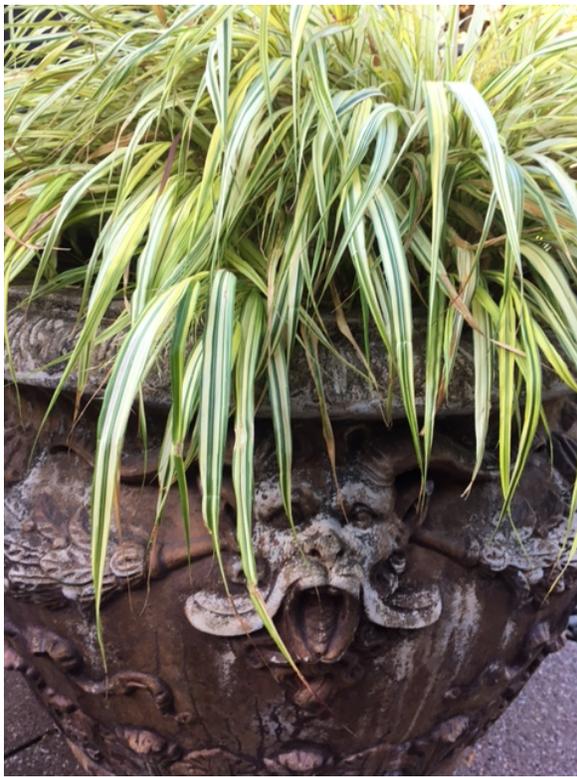
In warm, dry climates it should be grown in shade. In the cooler, moist climate of the Pacific Northwest, it is luxuriant even in nearly full sun. Compared to its strikingly variegated cultivar golden-variegated Hakone grass (*H. macra* 'Aureola'), it is more sun tolerant, cold-hardy, faster growing, and much easier to propagate. Hakone grass requires moist, organic, well-drained soil. It has shallow roots and is best divided in spring. Fall transplants are prone to cold damage and frost-heaving.

VanDusen has quite a few cultivars of Hakone grass. Golden-variegated Hakone grass, white-variegated Hakone grass and 'Red Wind' (Beni-kaze) are growing in the large grass bed. 'All Gold' is growing in the black and gold garden. Golden-variegated Hakone grass (*H. macra* 'Aureola') is the most beautiful of the cultivars. When grown in deep shade, the variegation is a lime green, but in part sun in warm regions, the variegation is a strong golden yellow. When grown in sun in cool climates, such as the Pacific Northwest, the variegation is more

cream-white than yellow. Cool temperatures in spring and in autumn bring on bits of pink and red to the foliage.

White-variegated Hakone grass (*H. macra* 'Albostriata') is larger and more vigorous than 'Aureola'. It is also more tolerant of warm, sunny sites. 'All Gold' has a similar growth rate and size as 'Aureola'. 'Red Wind' has solid green grass blades in summer that change to bright red in fall.

Hakone grass is a good accent plant or a ground cover planted in sweeps. I would choose the species (*Hakonechloa macra*) and the cultivar golden-variegated Hakone grass (*H. macra* 'Aureola') for a Japanese style garden. They are easier on the eye than white-variegated Hakone grass (*H. macra* 'Albostriata') and a more subtle contrast than 'All Gold'.



*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' - container tamed

### Sources

The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses – Rick Darke  
Shingon – Taiko Yamasaki

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<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fe200200912gt.html>