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Sunset

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Sunset's
**GARDEN
GUIDE**

Feathery grasses... best picks among strawberries, peppers tested for Los Angeles

February is a transition month in Southern California as the last of winter's cold, rainy days give way to sunny days with clear blue skies. Gardening opportunities are picking up. Sunny days offer the last chance to shop for bare-root plants and blooming azaleas and camellias, and to finish up winter chores like dormant spraying and pruning—best done before the trees leaf out. When rainy weather keeps you indoors, start seeds for your spring and summer garden.

Oriental fountain grass blooms long

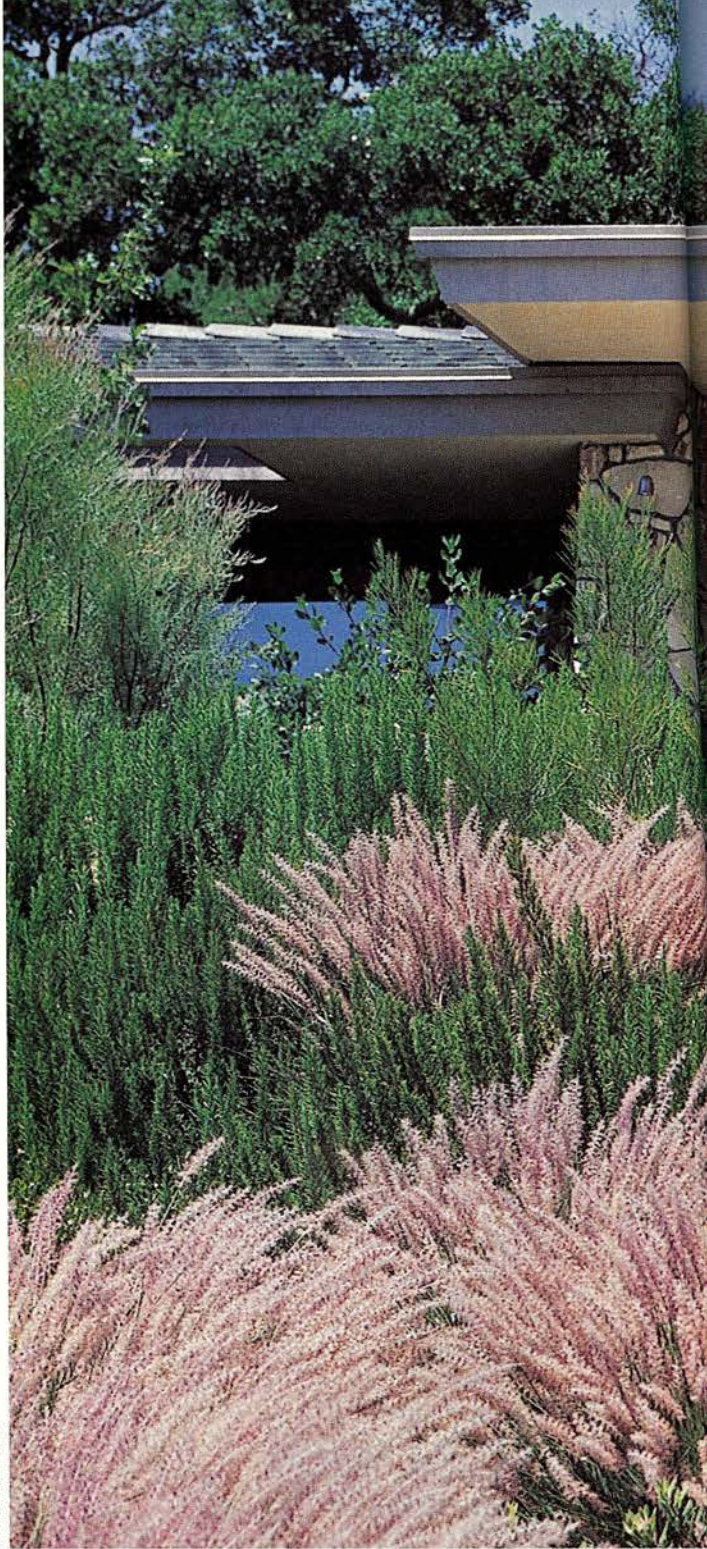
This ornamental grass (*Pennisetum orientale*), featured in the Arroyo Grande garden pictured at right, designed by J. Michael Barry and David Fross, flowers from May through October. The violet-pink flower tufts age to a dusky brown, eventually shattering in November. Plants are dormant in winter.

This clumping grass grows to 18 inches tall and equally wide. Its flower stems arch 12 to 16 inches above the light green foliage. The silky flower heads grow to about 4 inches long. This grass is not invasive, but an occasional seedling might appear elsewhere in your garden.

You can plant Oriental fountain grass this month. Choose a sunny spot with well-drained soil. The grass tolerates sandy soil and coastal conditions if given adequate water. It is not a thirsty plant but looks best with regular summer water.

Plants are commonly sold in 1-gallon containers; cost ranges from \$5 to \$7.

If you already have this plant in your garden, watch for



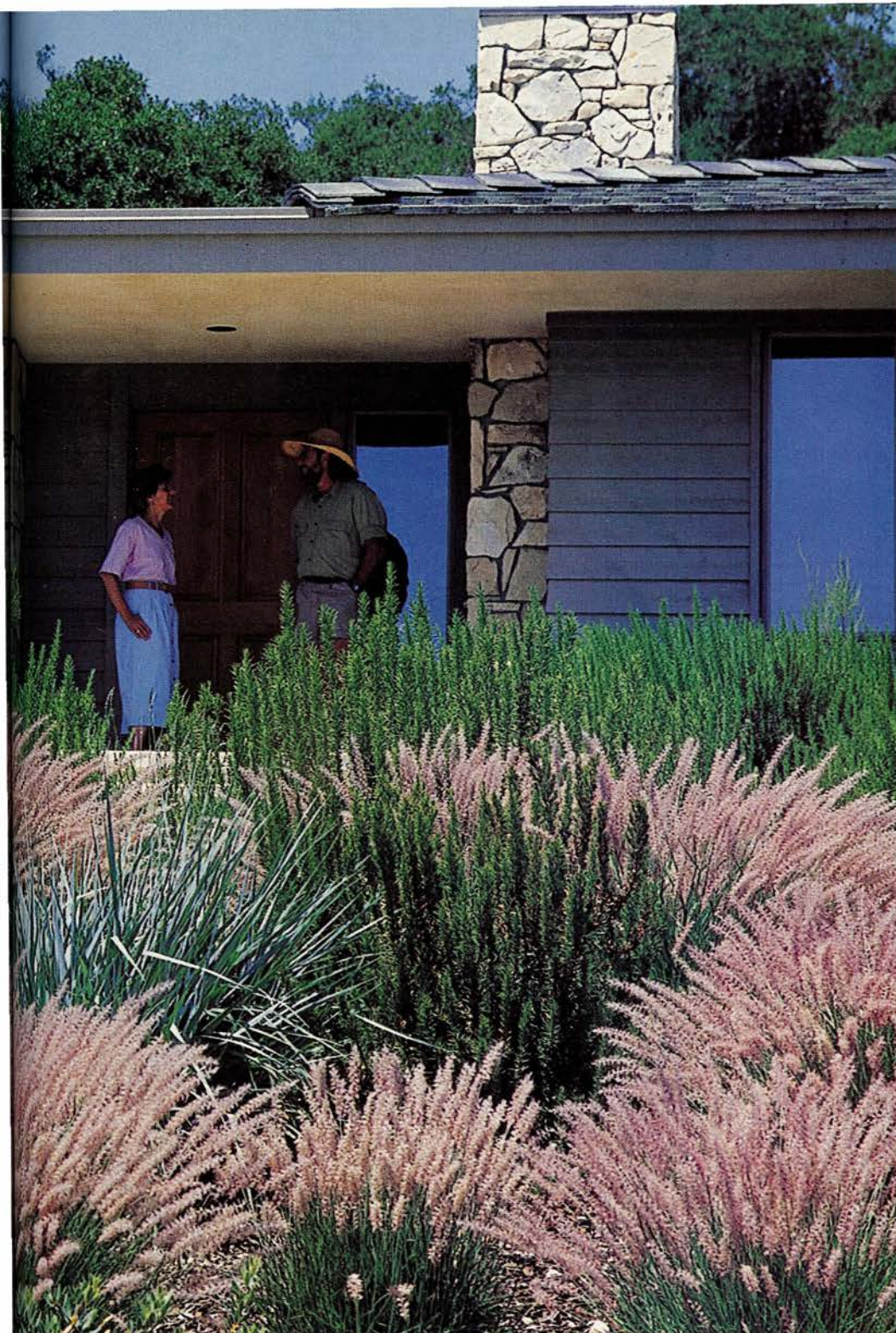
CHAD SLATTERY

new growth at the base. When it appears (later this month, most likely), cut back the old growth to a couple of inches above the crown.—Lynn Ocone

Pepper mania

What's the best pepper for Southern California gardeners to grow? Yvonne Freeman,

adult education coordinator of the Common Ground Garden Program in Los Angeles, decided to find out. Last year, she grew 35 kinds of peppers to identify those that grew best and developed the best flavor in Southern California. The picture at right shows a sample of her harvest. All the hot peppers



PINK WAVES of Oriental fountain grass contrast handsomely with green rosemary in this garden.

pepper was 'Chocolate Beauty', though seeds were tricky to germinate. The most prolific large-fruited peppers (3 inches and up) were 'Biscayne', 'Gypsy', and 'North Star'. Smaller sweet peppers are always more prolific, but 'Cherry' exceeded expectations—supplying especially hefty crops.

Sow seeds in flats 8 to 10 weeks before planting outdoors in late March or early April. Place in a warm (70° to 80°) location; the seeds will germinate in 10 to 20 days and be ready to plant 8 to 10 weeks later.

Order seeds now. Mail-order catalogs offer the best selection. Sources for the varieties tested include Ed Hume Seeds, Box 1450, Kent, Wash. 98035 (catalog \$1); Gurney's Seed & Nursery Co., 110 Capital St., Yankton, S.D. 57079, (605) 665-1930 (free); and Porter & Son Seedsmen, Box 104, Stephenville, Texas 76401 (free).—*Michael MacCaskey*

Best picks among strawberries

Southern California nurseries are well stocked this month with strawberries, sold bare-root and in cell-packs. Some varieties bear fruit the first year, and others fruit the following year.

The ones that bear fruit the first year (regardless of day length) are called day neutral or everbearing. Plants set out in February will give a small peak harvest in late spring or summer and continue setting fruit off and on through fall. 'Quinault' is an excellent everbearing strawberry with large, sweet, soft fruit. Other good varieties for Southern California are 'Fort Laramie', 'Ozark Beauty', and 'Tristar'.

June-bearing strawberries
(Continued on page 58)

BERNARD FALLON



grew well, but Freeman found significant differences among the sweet peppers.

The most flavorful sweet

GLOSSY RED PEPPERS, from big and plump to long and slender, are a few of the many kinds harvested in Southern California pepper test.