

# CENTRAL COAST LIVING HOME & GARDEN

Features Editor:  
Rochelle Reed, 781-792-  
rreed@thetribunenews.com

C12 THE TRIBUNE

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2005

SAN LUIS OBISPO

**SUNDAY**  
Arts, Books & Travel

**MONDAY**  
Personal Tech

**TUESDAY**  
Work & Family

**WEDNESDAY**  
Food & Wine

**THURSDAY**  
Health & Fitness

**FRIDAY**  
Home & Garden

**SATURDAY**  
Style & Trends

## GRASSES AS A DECORATIVE ELEMENT: A SAMPLING



Miscanthus sinensis 'Adagio' lines the driveway. Once a year Loan cuts them down with a weed trimmer with a steel blade.



Deer grass adds vertical interest to the meadow.



Pennisetum setaceum 'Rubrum' grows in a container.



Ornamental grasses provide the transition from formal flower beds to the rear garden shrubs and trees.

# A CALIFORNIA PRAIRIE

Jack Loan makes nonnative grasses thrive on his Edna Valley property ... without a lot of maintenance

By HEDDY RICHTER  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

A native of Illinois, Jack Loan has brought a bit of the prairie state to his Edna Valley home. Throughout the five-acre property, grasses sway in the wind, providing movement and color. Designed by Michael Barry of Los Osos, the garden was installed by Loan and his wife Pam.

The backyard includes a neat turf lawn and manicured perennial beds. Closer to the property lines, Loan has planted a naturalistic array of drought-tolerant shrubs and trees. Ornamental grasses mediate the transitions. Forming a backdrop to the flowers are Pennisetum orientale, a mid-sized ornamental grass, and Calamagrostis x acutiflora "Karl Forster" which adds vertical interest with flower stems up to six feet high. Panicum virgatum, a North American native, was once a mainstay of the American tall grass prairie. The cultivar Loan interplanted among the shrubs and trees, "Dallas blue," has a strong bluish cast to the leaves, and the flow-

ers turn reddish-purple in the fall.

Two small meadows highlight the front yard. Both are planted with Carex praegracilis, a native California sedge and dotted with Muhlenbergia rigens, deer grass. Loan added color to the meadows by planting penstemons and erigerons and allowing California poppies to naturalize.

The meadows don't require much maintenance. Loan waters them weekly in the summer and mows two or three times a year using a high-wheel mower. This year he skipped the usual dose of low-nitrogen agricultural fertilizer with mixed results. The grass is browner, he notes, "but if you don't push the grass with fertilizer, it needs less water." Loan suggests the key to a successful meadow is good site preparation: "To plant those meadow areas you have to do the same things you do when you plant a lawn."



Jack Loan

### Here's what Jack did:

- Before the Loans began the installation, they had their land graded to ensure water drained away from the dwelling and wouldn't puddle in the gardens. Then they had two swales cut to direct water to a roadside drainage culvert.
- Jack and Pam laid 22,000 feet of buried pipe for their irrigation system. They installed stubouts at regular intervals for drip emitters or pop-up sprinklers. Jack uses 12-inch overhead sprinklers for the meadows.
- The soil on their property is mostly hard clay. Before planting, Loan amended the soil with over 100 cubic yards of rice hulls to keep the particles of clay from compacting. He recommends using as much as you can afford of the best soil amendment and rototilling it in with a balanced fertilizer such as 6-20-20. Carex is a sideways-growing grass. If the soil is too hard, it won't move through the dirt or send roots down deep enough to be drought-tolerant.
- Grasses can be slightly aggressive. Jack protects his accent plants by planting them in 15-gallon containers with the bottoms cut out. Vinyl edging keeps the meadow from creeping into adjoining garden areas.

Erigerons, penstemons and poppies dot the meadow with color.

PHOTOS BY HEDDY RICHTER