

PINK HAIRGRASS/PURPLE MUHLY

Muhlenbergia capillaris

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Few plants rival the breathtaking beauty of purple muhly in the fall -- clouds of purple wisps waving in the autumn sun. From March until mid August, the thin spiky blades add interesting contrast to broad-leaved blooming perennials and annuals and evergreen shrubs. In early fall, the seed heads begin to form where the blade bends at a right angle, and by the end of September, the tip of each blossoms into a 10 x 6-inch filmy purple haze.

In winter the purple stems and seed heads dim to tan, providing a lovely contrast to evergreens. In March the old stems can be cut back, when the new growth emerges, and dropped as mulch and groundcover.

Muhly grass is tough and loves the heat; many nurseries are now offering this plant for sale.

This grass is a native of dry woods and savannas near the Atlantic coast and parts of Mississippi and Texas. In Virginia it will grow in full sun or light shade and poor soil, and tolerates drought. Deer do not bother this plant, as there are no significant seeds or leaves for browse.

The genus was named in homage to G.H.E. Muhlenberg, a self-taught botanist of the 18th century, called by his contemporaries the American Linnaeus. "*Capillaris*" means "hair-like or delicate", referring to the tufted purple flowers. ❖



Photo: Pink Hairgrass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) taken by Jan Newton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.