

I LOVE THIS PLANT

WATCHING THE GRASS (TREE) GROW

Learn what makes this slow-growing Australian grass tree so special, and why grower Randy Baldwin of San Marcos Growers still loves it after 30 years.

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While I was working on a project to restore the grounds at Franceschi Park in Santa Barbara back in the 1980s, I saw a large, peculiar specimen—probably 12 feet tall—with a form unlike anything I'd ever seen. Although it looked like a grass, it had a large semiwoody stem like a yucca. I soon discovered that it was *Xanthorrhoea arborea*—an evergreen perennial known as Western Australian grass tree—and from that moment on, I was hooked.

I eventually ordered seed of a few *Xanthorrhoea* species from a supplier in Western Australia: *X. arborea*, *X. glauca*, and *X. preissii*. After growing them for a number of years, I've become particularly fond of *X. preissii*. Of all the *Xanthorrhoea* species I've tried, I like its leaves the best—gorgeous narrow slivers with a bluish tint. It also seems to grow a little faster than other *Xanthorrhoea*, which, in general, are slow-growing plants. Even if you bought a 15-gallon specimen, it would still take 10 years or more for it to develop much of a trunk, and decades or even centuries to get near its full size of 12 feet tall and 8 feet wide. I guess that's what makes them special—it's extremely hard to find a mature specimen for purchase, so you usually have to either raise them yourself or offer to buy and dig older plants growing in someone else's garden.

One of my favorite things about *Xanthorrhoea* is its flower spike, which shoots up to 10 feet above its leaves after reaching maturity, at about 7 to 10 years of age. It is covered in small star-shaped white flowers that are attractive to bees, and is especially beautiful as it ages

to cream and then brown. The stalk can stay on the plant up to a year after flowering, then often just cracks off at the base. At San Marcos Growers, we keep the dried stalks around the nursery for decoration and collect the seed.

Once, while driving across Australia with a group of horticulturists from UC Santa Cruz, I stumbled upon a plain of *X. preissii* in bloom. It looked like miles of them were scattered across the landscape, much the way Joshua trees dot the landscape in the Mojave Desert. I think that's how they look best in the garden, too—scattered about. But even if you can get your hands on only one specimen, do it. And place it in a prominent planter or plant it outside a window so you can enjoy it frequently.

As a whole, the genus isn't fussy about planting or care. When I first acquired mine, I planted the seeds without amendments, then watered fairly regularly for about a year until established. The key, I think, is planting in a location with well-draining soil and not overwatering. In my garden my *X. preissii* gets water maybe once every month, and I rarely ever water my *X. glauca*, so both are relatively drought tolerant. I haven't found any pest problems with either species, and the only upkeep I do is removing old leaves to expose the dark brown trunk. They are hardy to at least 20 degrees Fahrenheit in locations that experience only a short period of freezing temperatures.

Xanthorrhoea preissii looks stunning planted in mass (shown here) or as a specimen. Flower spikes up to 10 feet tall rise above 2- to 4-foot-long grassy leaves.