

Using Dried Grasses

by Stephan V. Hopman
Frankfort, IL

I work at Amoco Oil's Whiting, Indiana refinery and we make over two hundred products from a barrel of oil. But oil is not the only product we produce here in Whiting. I thought I would share with you an unusual use for a "homegrown" product we produce – dried grasses!

About four years ago I noticed a tall grasslike plant topped with a fine plume growing on Amoco's Lost Marsh restoration project property. This was identified as Phragmites *Phragmites australis* – an invasive species from

Europe. Phragmites is bad for the environment as it has a tendency to take over shutting out all the native species. This tall grasslike plant grows between 4 to 8 feet tall and has several very large grasslike leaves. Around late summer it shoots up a single tall stalk that ends in a 4-8" plume.

This very soft plume is best collected in January, February and March. When the plume first appears in early fall it's covered with tiny "puffball" seeds. If you bring this into your home, soon your house has this fuzz everywhere. If you wait until the December winds have beaten some of the seeds off it's much less messy.

I collected a bag full of these plumes and sprayed them with an anti-mite spray that is safe for birds to kill any mites that may have been present. I intertwined them into the cage bars all throughout a cage containing a pair of Blue-capped Cordon Bleus. These small blue and brown finches originate from northern Kenya, southern Somalia and Tanzania. Also the plumes were used to completely cover up the nesting wicker basket. As soon as I removed my hands from the cage the male bird swooped down and picked up a beak full of the grass. He started jumping up and down and singing his courtship song to impress his mate.

Since then this pair has given me many clutches of baby birds. This is because the thick cover hid them from sight and allowed them the privacy that they need to feel secure enough to breed.

Another grass that I collect is called switchgrass *Panicum vergatum*. Switchgrass is a native American perennial that was planted years ago in out in Amoco's J & L tank field. There are literally acres and acres of this 2-4 foot tall grass. This also grows on midwest prairies and in areas that have been previously disturbed such as alongside railroad tracks or underneath high tension



Witchgrass growing out of cracks in concrete.



Switchgrass growing in a Whiting, Indiana neighborhood.

Photos by Stephan V. Hopman

wires. This is sold as an ornamental grass in the seed catalogs. Of course as soon as it reaches the stage that it looks good as an ornamental – it's time to chop it off for your birds!

Towards late summer the plant sends out many fine tiny grass seeds on spindly threads. I chop off only the top half of the plant leaving the remainder for the native birds and to allow it to re-grow the following season. After drying, it's tied up into small bundles and placed into the upper corners of my cages. My Black-cheeked Waxbills, Blue-capped Waxbills, and parrot finches (Red-headed and Forbes) go crazy for it. They eat the seeds, use the stems for courtship displays, and stuff it into nest boxes. Most of my finches burrow into it and weave their own nests. I consider this grass a terrific breeding stimulant for all my finches.

The last one that I use is called

Witchgrass *Panicum capillare*. This low growing native American perennial is found in great quantity. It tends to take over areas in which it grows and pushes out the previously established vegetation. This grass stands about 8-12 inches tall and 6-12 inches in circumference. Both its leaves and seed heads are very fine and soft. When harvesting, chop off only the top two thirds of the plant so it comes back the next year. The small birds love to use it to line their nests after constructing the shell from Switchgrass. Owl Finches and Gouldian Finches are particularly fond of this one. It makes a good cushion for their fragile eggs.

Using the combination of these grasses has enabled me to breed some difficult species. In the wild the little finches we love to observe are basically prey for the larger creatures around them. They spend a lot of time under cover trying to look inconspicuous so as not to become lunch. When they nest they hide their nests in thickets or leafy areas so as not to have the nesting site apparent to the predators. If they can look out of their nest and see you, then they figure that you can see them and their nest site. This is why they abandon the clutch. They think "why bother to raise this clutch up when the big predators outside will just eat the juicy babies anyway! Best to abandon this nest site and start anew at another location."

By hiding nest baskets and boxes

among dried grasses the birds feel safer to breed and won't readily abandon the nest site. The grasses also stimulate the cocks to court and display to their hens. They gather the grasses in their beaks and display by dancing and singing in front of the hens. It's important to have as much of a variety of different types of grasses available as individual birds have preferences for grass type. Misting with a fine spray twice a day also helps by simulating the rainy season which is when most finches breed.

In closing let me give you my opinion on the breeding of finches in general. I feel that breeding these birds in captivity is necessary as habitat in the wild is being decimated at an alarming rate. The only hope for some of these species may be for release of captive bred birds into their native habitats. Already the Gouldian finch is rapidly disappearing in the wild due to habitat destruction. In African countries the human population will only increase in the future with resulting pressure on the remaining wildlife populations and the loss of their habitats. The export ban of Australian birds caused the Europeans to concentrate their efforts on establishing domestic strains of the Australian finches. Most of these are now well established. It's time now to do the same to the African estrilidids. I believe that using some of the techniques mentioned above can help us to achieve this goal. 🐦

Photo by Stephan V. Hopman



Last year's growth of *Phragmites* towers over new green growth of this year's crop.