

# The art of bedding

Brita von Schoenaich's borders for one of London's leading art galleries are an avant-garde approach to a traditional planting challenge, writes Andrew Wilson



Andrew Wilson is a garden designer and lecturer, and is the Royal Horticultural Society's chair of assessors for show gardens.

Brita von Schoenaich made her name in Britain as a pioneer of the New Perennial Movement, a gardening style that continues to transform planting in gardens and public spaces across the UK (see designer profile, overleaf). Thanks to her and other leading figures in landscape and garden design, such as Piet Oudolf, Tom Stuart-Smith, Christopher Bradley-Hole and Julie Toll, where once there were mixed borders, ground-cover plants or shrubs, increasingly

there are now elegant plantings of easygoing grasses and perennials.

Part of Brita's motivation in arguing for this new planting style was ecological – she believed in planting capable of sustaining itself in natural equilibrium over years, without need for significant maintenance, including feeding. Ultimately, though, Brita is a creative spirit, and her designs for Tate Britain, the subject of this feature, show that she's not dogmatic about her ecological theories, and is keen to experiment with different approaches. In these borders, she uses annuals and bulbs planted in seasonal bedding displays, a complete departure from her more sustainable, perennial-based planting schemes.

## A startling new approach

Most bedding in the UK is in the hands of maintenance departments rather than designers, so there's little design innovation: traditional floral clocks and carpet patterns still dominate. When Brita was invited to make planting proposals for the two new beds created at Tate Britain in 2001, she saw it as a chance to experiment. Her first designs, though, now look a little tame. "I think we were a little scared of the idea – it's such a public platform," she says as we look through the designs in her office in Petersham, near Richmond-upon-Thames.

Since that first design, though, Brita's office has produced a series of energetic, experimental and vibrant planting schemes. Occasionally the designs share a theme with exhibitions in the gallery, but otherwise Brita's team enjoy a remarkable degree of freedom, generating most



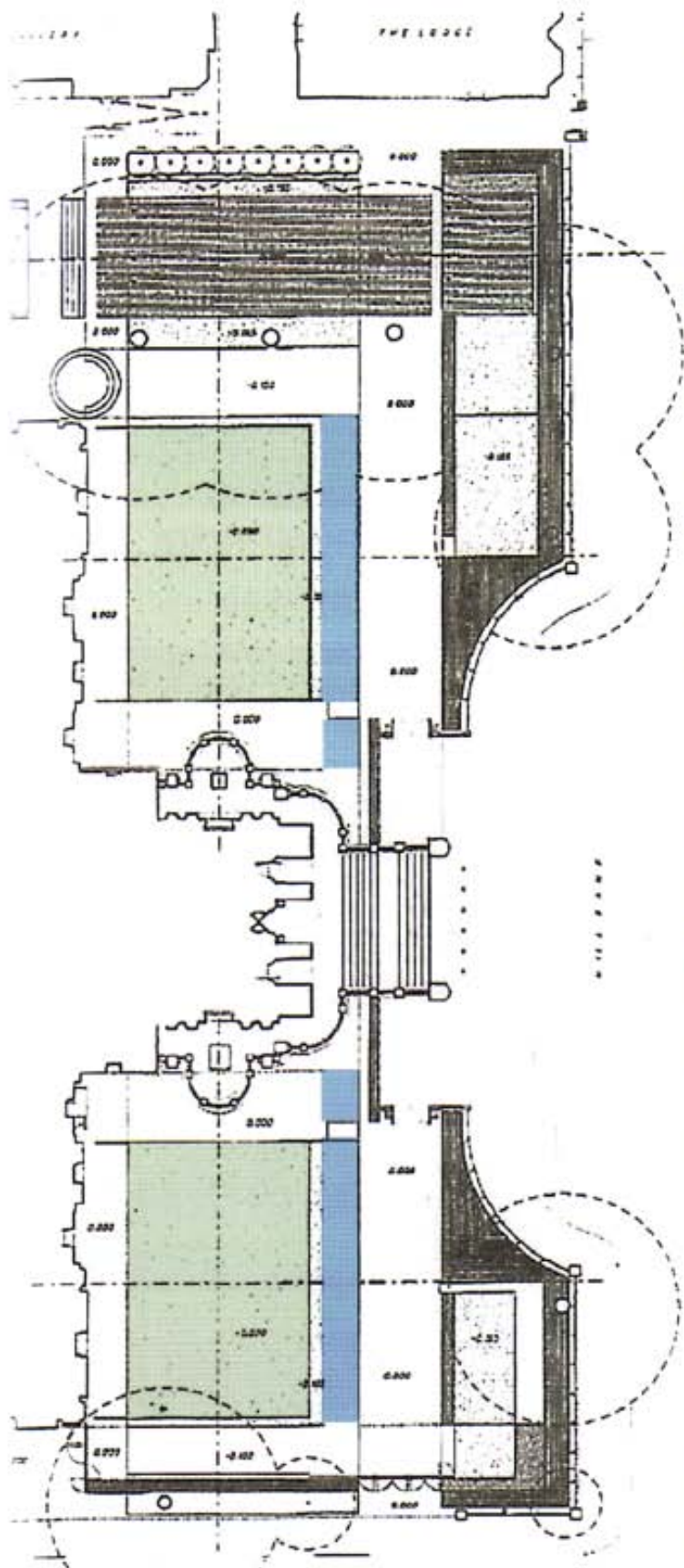
## 1 SPRING 2003

Agricultural field patterns inspired this planting scheme. Winter wheat provides ground cover; through which densely planted strips of *Tulipa* 'Lilac Time' appear. Other bulbs grow in random positions; Brita asked gallery visitors to throw them onto the plot, and planted them wherever they landed.



## 2 SUMMER 2004

Sloping blocks of willow (seen at the back of the border in this view) provide semi-permanent structure and height. A riotous mix of lively oranges, yellows and pinks, including magenta *Cleome hassleriana* 'Queen Violet'. *Salvia*s provide a rich purple base colour. Turn the page to see the spring version of these beds.



### 3 SPRING 2006

Spring barley was meant to be the main plant in this design, with a random arrangement of tulips 'Balade' and 'Lilac Time', but pigeons devoured the spring barley so Brita made a second sowing of an annual meadow mix to green up the beds. The meadow mix was left to mature through the summer (below).



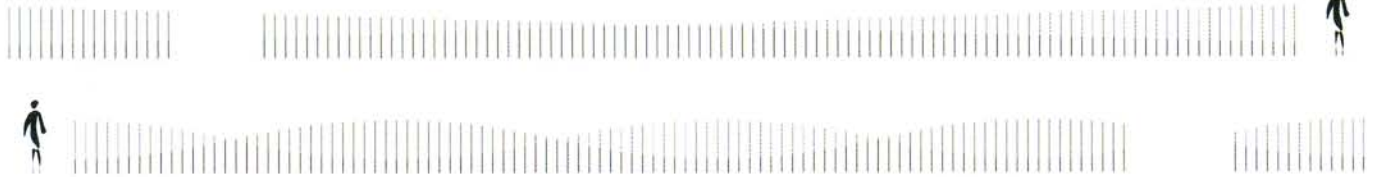
### 4 SUMMER 2006

As the annual meadow mix was a late addition to the previous winter scheme (above), Brita decided it should stay until its flowering peak, which can be seen here. The scheme was then replanted in early August with a mixture of sunflowers and garden nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum*) providing a colourful contrast for high summer.



## 5 SPRING 2004

Beech woodlands inspired these dense plantings of willow rods (below), in overlapping bands. Tulips provided first a low ground-cover of fresh foliage, then flowers (above and right) – the fresh green white of *Tulipa* 'Spring Green' combined with cream *T. 'Sapporo'*. Brita left many of the willows in place for the summer bedding scheme that followed (see page 82).



▷ of the planting ideas themselves. The winter scheme is normally planted in late October or early November, and the summer scheme in April. Alongside the customary annuals and seeded meadow areas, she has used surprising plants such as winter wheat, willow and oil seed rape, as well as bulbs and perennials. The rape and winter wheat were disasters, Brita admits, mainly because pigeons ate the seed before it could germinate. Spring barley worked well, though, providing a structure for the planting and complementing more colourful companion plants. Brita often uses successional planting to keep the borders colourful over these long seasons.

The public response over the last nine years has been tremendous, according to Brita, and visitors regularly ask about the various plant associations. Brita's use of sloping wedges of willow, pictured above, produced a particularly strong reaction from the public.

### Keeping options open

Brita accepts that this is not the greenest of approaches to planting design. For example, she is using plants grown on in plastic pots in heated greenhouses. The more the schemes can rely on plant grown from seed in situ, or on hardy annuals, the more sustainable the product – but this would also limit her options as a designer. For Brita, it's important not to impose too many constraints on creativity.

The commission seems to inspire the whole design team and it is indeed rare for a designer to be presented with this opportunity and freedom. After taking those first scary steps, the enjoyment and exuberance evident in her design thinking is delivered regularly in planted form in schemes which themselves should one day be the subject of an exhibition at Tate Britain. □



### DESIGNER PROFILE

Brita von Schoenaich studied landscape design initially in her home country, Germany, before coming to England to study horticulture at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, then landscape architecture at the University of Central England. She practices as a

landscape architect but returned to Kew to teach design on the horticulture diploma programme. Her planting style was influenced by Continental designers and comprised mainly grasses and perennials, designed to sustain themselves over time with little maintenance – for example, they could be left standing well into the winter months.

She brought her European perspective on planting design to bear on a British audience in a landmark conference at Kew in 1994 with her former business partner Tim Rees. She now practices from her base in Petersham as part of a multi-disciplinary team combining art, architecture and horticulture. Her passion for plants remains a central tenet in her work for which she is in demand in both the UK and continental Europe. She has worked on several gardens and landscapes that are open to the public, including Marks Hall in Essex ([www.markshall.org.uk](http://www.markshall.org.uk)) and Garden Organic Ryton, in Warwickshire ([www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk)).