



The English garden is having a makeover. Designers led by Dutch guru Piet Oudolf offer a signature look that melds their European roots with classic British style, says Tim Richardson. Portraits: Charlie Hopkinson and Jonathan Root.

Ever since the Duchess of Northumberland's controversial decision to employ a non-British design team for her ambitious new garden at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland, which opened in 2002, the spotlight has been on foreign designers working in Britain. The Duchess's decision to go with the formalists Jacques and Peter Wirtz (Wirtz International) of Belgium caused a furore, not so much because of a trade union-style reaction from British designers angry about foreigners "taking their jobs", but more because of comments the Duchess made about wishing to avoid the "grandes dames" of the English garden design scene.

Such a view rankled with many, but there was some merit in the observation; by the mid-1990s many people felt British garden design had become stuck in a rut. There was a hardening conviction among more thoughtful gardeners that British garden design in the grand tradition – the Arts and Crafts style so magisterially codified almost a century earlier by Gertrude Jekyll – had run its course, with British gardens bursting with a profusion of different flowers arranged in ever more complex combinations of colour and form. It was as if the English herbaceous border had reached its final, most decadent and rococo phase and was ready to implode. Coming fresh to the subject, the Duchess had managed to put her finger on its abiding malaise.

A surfeit of new ideas soon began to be broadcast about what a modern garden could be. There was the "lifestyle" garden of decking and barbecues so beloved of television makeover shows. It was really a warmed-over version of 1950s Californian modernism, and the fad soon waned. In the event, the most substantial innovations were those imported from abroad.

First there was a vogue for an Antipodean look, with cordylines and tree ferns in particular becoming expensive, sought-after fixtures in glamorous gardens designed by muscular, 30-something Australians or (more frequently) New Zealanders and ending up as an almighty cliché of urban gardening. The second, more long-lasting trend from abroad was the so-called "new perennials" or "new wave" look from Germany and Holland in which grasses and perennial flowers are planted in naturalistic drifts which look good not only in the traditional peak months of May to July but also in late summer and autumn as the golds and russets of the grasses complement the flowers' soft purples and blues. It is a look that was pioneered in the public parks of postwar Germany, and real enthusiasts still travel to places such as Munich's Westpark to see how it should be done. For the average British gardener, on the other hand, the

approach simply offers a potentially more relaxing take on gardening, with planning for colour effect kept to a minimum and plants allowed to "do their own thing" as much as possible. And with fewer garden owners either able or willing to expend large sums on gardeners' fees and salaries, the slacker maintenance regime is an added incentive.

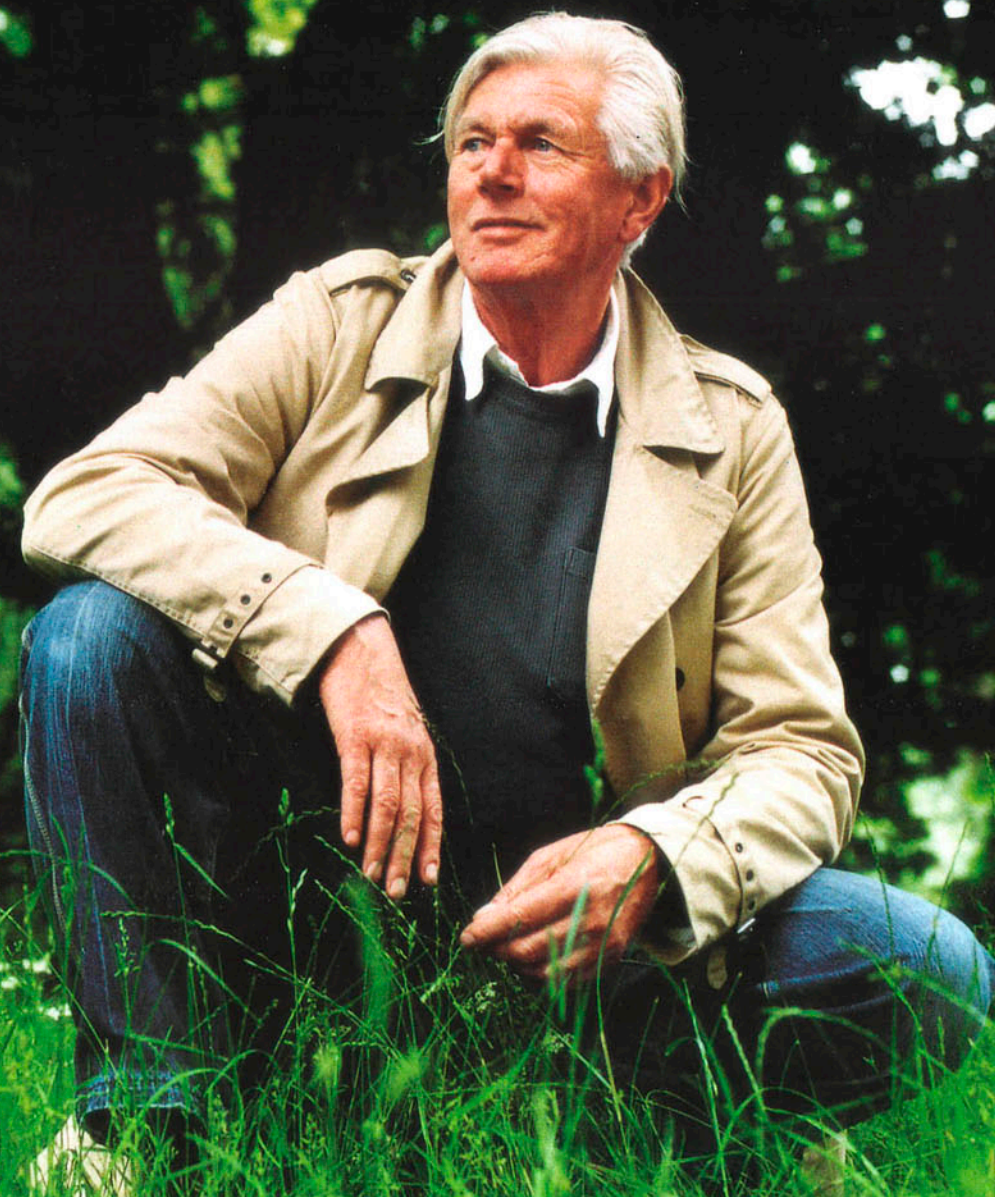
Leading British designers – and Chelsea Flower Show stars – such as Tom Stuart-Smith, Christopher Bradley-Hole and Dan Pearson have clearly been influenced by this new attitude to planting and are more than happy to acknowledge the fact. Broadly, there is now more emphasis on form and structure in British border design, with grasses often taking over the role that flowering shrubs used to play in bulking up the picture. It is no longer a matter of the set-piece herbaceous border being looked upon as an intricate tapestry of colour and texture, utilising a dazzling array of plants. Instead, a more natural feel to the garden as a whole has been introduced, with plants surging and receding in drifts as the seasons change. The seedheads and wilting foliage of dying plants in autumn and winter are an integral part of the look – which is heresy, of course, in traditional British border style.

Main picture: Piet Oudolf, "godfather of the new perennials style". Above: a walk on the wild side at Waltham Place, courtesy of Henk Gerritsen.

The godfather of the new perennials style is the snowy-haired Dutchman Piet Oudolf, who has published a string of successful books on the topic and fulfilled commissions for a number of private clients in Britain. He is now one of the hottest international garden designers, with public commissions throughout Europe (including the ambitious restoration of Trentham gardens in Staffordshire) and the US – where he worked on Chicago's magnificent Millennium Park and is now creating planting designs for New York's derelict High Line elevated railway, reborn as an above-ground public park. But Oudolf is far from the only choice out there. A number of other designers offer a signature look which melds their European roots with classic British garden style in an excitingly innovative way. Some of them have even made their home in Britain.

Take Brita von Schoenaich, not one of the most high-profile but certainly one of the most respected European designers working in Britain. Born in Hamburg, she trained in landscape architecture in Germany and worked in a nursery there before going to Kew to study for its world-renowned three-year Diploma in horticulture (a qualification to look out for on the CV of any gardener or garden designer). In 1989 she formed a design partnership with Tim Rees and in 2004 set up her own practice, Schoenaich Landscape Architects. Since then she has garnered an impressive client list including a number of stars from the wider art and design world, such as Cath Kidston and Anish Kapoor. Most of von

continental drift



Schoenaich's work is in Britain, though she has commissions in France, Sweden and Germany and is designing the new garden for the British Embassy in Warsaw with Tony Fretton Architects. Of her four colleagues, one is Italian, one French, one Polish and one English. She jokes: "We are always being asked to do English gardens."

As for her experience as a German designer resident in England, von Schoenaich reflects, "It's wonderful working here – the climate is so liberating. We can grow so many more plants in so many combinations that would be impossible in harsher climates such as Germany's." What about temperamental differences in horticulture? "It is true that we [Germans] are quite dogmatic," she says. "And the Dutch. The English are more intuitive and there is this wonderful amateur tradition in gardening that we don't have. The English are very rooted, in a way. There is an attachment to the soil and nature which is different to Germany, where we have more modernist designers. My take on the English garden is different because I'm from abroad. I try to look at the wider landscape, to simplify the surroundings to some extent."

Von Schoenaich is inextricably associated with the new perennials look because she played a key role in its early development in Britain as the organiser of two seminal conferences on the subject at Kew in 1994 and 1997. But she has moved on: "So many people were so passionate about this new perennials thing, but for me it was never really a 'school' or a manifesto. I always want to try out new things – not to follow fashions, but to experiment on my own." Presumably her students at Kew, where von Schoenaich teaches garden and landscape design, help keep the style mobile.

At the moment von Schoenaich is preoccupied with what she calls "plant compatibility" – the idea of using a pared-down palette of plants which will thrive together ecologically and aesthetically in almost any situation. This she expresses as a linear style of planting – something that can be seen in her treatment of the borders in front of Tate Britain, and to some extent in her recent design for the walled garden at Marks Hall, a public arboretum in Essex. Instead of trying to mimic naturalistic patterns, six to 10 types of plant are arranged in straight lines, with no intermingling, to make

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a striking formal pattern. At the Tate's seasonal planting she even employed a random method, throwing a die to determine which of six plants to use, then throwing again to ascertain the number of metres. With the right combinations, she aims to create a modern look with a diverse palette – quite unlike the traditional herbaceous border. These schemes may also increase longevity and reduce maintenance, while staying interesting all year round.

Antwerp-born Isabelle van Groeningen is another Kew-trained designer who has made her home and career in Britain, though her practice is more international than von Schoenaich's, with half of her work in Britain, about 45 per cent in Germany and the remaining five per cent elsewhere, including Portugal and Uruguay. If anything, van Groeningen has an even more "English" pedigree because, after going to Kew for the Diploma at the age of 18, she worked for the



gardens advisory team at the National Trust for three years and then completed the historic parks and gardens conservation course at York University. A PhD on the development of herbaceous planting in Germany and Britain followed. She then set up a private practice, Land Art, in 1992 with the German designer Gabriella Pape.

Van Groeningen says she was overwhelmed by the perennials plantings in Munich and Berlin parks during visits in the late 1980s, and vividly recalls the excitement of the 1994 Kew conference organised by von Schoenaich: "It was an amazing day. There was this electricity in the air." Van Groeningen's work since then can broadly be said to follow the new perennials approach, with perhaps a more structured and rhythmic plan than in others' work. In a public setting her style can probably be seen to best effect in her long border at Eltham Palace, south London, where sedums which create attractive mounds at a low level are

Above: Brita von Schoenaich (left) and Isabelle van Groeningen in a von Schoenaich garden at The Old Boat House in Lower Radley.

is not for non-believers, however, and it is revealing that Strilli Oppenheimer, his client at Waltham Place, is also his most enthusiastic supporter. While the work of his countryman Oudolf can be described as positively decorative

in some of its phases, with clever intermingling of plant structures and habits across a wide horticultural canvas, Gerritsen is disposed to let it all hang out, to let his "natural" philosophy of planting dictate the mood instead of conventional horticultural tinkering. This is gardening at its wildest, caught the moment before it descends into plain messiness.

On this point Gerritsen is implacable: "You can take it further than I do but those gardens are messy. It isn't nature. Nature is not a mess; it is orderly and logical. People don't ask why a plant is growing somewhere; there is always a reason. That's different to a garden. What you have to do in a garden is introduce the same kind of logic – the feeling that it's right but you don't know why. Plants are not decorative creatures, you know; they are living things with a purpose and a place."

Gerritsen does acknowledge that his own style intervenes with the processes of the wild – "I'm not imitating nature; there is a personal touch in the work" – but he insists at the same time that the gardener should be looked upon as part of nature, not simply as someone who is making an artificial pastiche of it. For him, gardens are a continuation of nature, and he emphasises the importance of observing plant communities in the wild. "You can't improve on nature but you can intensify the experience," he says. "In a garden you have many more plants than in nature – but I'm inspired by nature, not by other gardens. I hardly ever visit gardens. I'm not interested in all those beautiful borders."

The influx of new ideas and people from mainland Europe into the British gardening scene is probably its most lively characteristic at the moment. But it would be wrong to try to identify national tendencies among individual designers – design style is much more amorphous and mobile than that. Noël Kingsbury, the leading British exponent of the new perennials look, and a close collaborator with Oudolf, believes that British gardens have been markedly changed for the better by this foreign influence: "We've discovered grasses, though not the biggest and most exciting ones, and we are now exploring a robust plant palette that can stand up to weeds. This can lead to a huge reliance on geranium species, for example, so you can easily end up with something that looks like the English cottage garden, writ large."

Perhaps what goes around comes around, after all. ♦

THE GARDEN STATE

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Above: Verbena bonariensis, Salvia nemorosa "Ostfriesland" and iris leaves in von Schoenaich's garden at Marks Hall in Essex.

spend more money but the English often have a more fundamental knowledge. We can have real discussions." She says it's wrong to imagine that Dutch gardeners are all creating new perennials extravaganzas in the style of Oudolf: "The Dutch tend to favour English-style gardens. I look at them and say, "Ah, that's Hidcote." For van Groeningen, Britain remains the place for the cutting edge in international horticulture.

For a walk on the wildest side of all, however, consider the work of Dutchman Henk Gerritsen, an ecological visionary who has created his most substantial private commission not in Holland but in Britain, at Waltham Place in Berkshire (a private estate that is open to the public). The Gerritsen look