



BEYOND THE FRONTIER

'NEW PERENNIAL' IS THE NEXT BIG THING, SAYS ELSPETH THOMPSON. WHY? IT'S LOW-MAINTENANCE, WORKS ANYWHERE AND LOOKS GOOD ALL YEAR



'Like a fireworks display in slow motion,' is how Brita von Schoenaich and Tim Rees describe the perennial garden they have created at Ryton Organic Gardens, near Coventry. Designed to look good all year round with minimal maintenance, their naturalistic groups of grasses, shrubs and herbaceous perennials unfold with the seasons, with one plant emerging from another, and taller specimens shooting up amid drifts of different colours and textures, culminating in a spectacular late-summer and autumn display. It's then, with the low sun slanting through pale plumes of giant grasses, and illuminating great bursts of purple asters, golden rudbeckias and blazing red hot pokers, that the fireworks analogy is most apt.

The garden was started three years ago, as a demonstration area to show how the 'new perennial' style of planting so popular in Germany and Holland might be used in Britain. Brita von Schoenaich, who was born in Hamburg and met Tim Rees, her business partner, while studying at Kew, had grown up with this kind of gardening, which is sometimes known as 'prairie planting', as its inspiration is the natural plant communities of a wild open landscape. 'The idea is to use only vigorous, reliable plants that are suited to the soil and conditions, and that have compatible growth patterns so they won't compete with one another,' she says. First espoused by the German gardener and ecologist Karl Foerster at the turn of the century, it is now common in German parks and gardens such as the West Park in Munich, and is fast gaining ground in Holland (where Piet Oudolf has his well-known nursery) and in America, where James van Sweden and the German-born Wolfgang Oehme are converting lawn-obsessed Americans back to prairie-style plants.

With its emphasis on sculptural grasses and wild-looking clumps of perennials, new perennial has a naturalistic beauty all of its own, but was virtually unheard of here until Schoenaich and Rees organised a series of conferences at Kew in the mid-Nineties. 'Beth Chatto was one of only two British speakers,' says Tim Rees, 'but it was a great meeting of minds. And it hit the English gardening scene like a bombshell.' Because the gardener is fighting neither the natural conditions nor the natural growth habits and requirements of the plants, new perennial gardening is much less of a struggle to maintain than the traditional herbaceous border – a factor which Schoenaich hopes will make it popular in public and private gardens in Britain: 'The Ryton garden was designed to give just as much colour and pleasure and interest as one of Gertrude Jekyll's finest borders, but without the staking, lifting, dividing and dead-heading that used to keep a team of Edwardian gardeners busy all year round.' Incredible though it might seem, now that it is established this garden should survive on a rough pruning with shears every February and precious little else.

In a further contrast to our ingrained idea of a traditional border, new perennial planting does not rely on a hedge or wall as backdrop. Essentially open in structure – the garden at Ryton occupies an area of 50m x 25m (164ft x 82ft) surrounded by other organic demonstration gardens – the absence of confining boundaries

Main picture, left: a bright drift of *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' in the foreground with red *Persicaria affinis* 'Donald Lowndes' surrounded by clumps of swaying grasses. Above, from left: tufts of the perennial grass *Stipa calamagrostis* with the everlasting *Anaphalis triplinervis*; *Echinacea purpurea*; *S. calamagrostis*, *A. triplinervis* and *Aster amellus* 'Veilchenkönigin'

From left to right: *Miscanthus sinensis*; *Stipa calamagrostis*, *Anaphalis triplinervis*, *Aster amellus* 'Veilchenkönigin'; *Perovskia* 'Blue Spike'; *M. sinensis* with *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm'



'For a totally year-round garden, you could underplant with a carpet of spring-flowering bulbs. And perhaps some alliums for early summer, when the grasses are still only knee-high. But once they take off you really don't need anything else'

means more sunshine can penetrate and illuminate the plants. The structure is provided by the plants themselves, as they sweep in bold drifts across the ground, with groups of low plants and taller grasses repeated across the area, imitating the natural rhythms and combinations that are found in the wild. A gravel mulch not only keeps down weeds and preserves moisture, but also creates a loose network of paths in more open areas, allowing visitors to walk through the garden and get access to particular plants they might want to admire. 'We aim for strong contrasts in terms of overall form, leaf shape, colour and texture,' says Rees. 'But instead of dotting plants around, we tend to mass them in groups. The idea is to avoid anything remotely fussy or bitty.'

It sounds simple, but what Schoenaich and Rees have done here is actually very subtle. In the three years since

they created this garden, grasses have become fashionable, and many others have had a stab at combining them with flowering perennials in this type of planting. But few have succeeded in creating a border which sustains interest for a full ten months of the year. The secret, says Schoenaich, lies in what she calls their 'layered planting': the way they group plants to emerge through a layer of contrasting flowers or foliage, to extend the interest as well as provide added height or drama. Thus, tall clumps of the grass *Miscanthus sinensis* emerge from swathes of the daisy-like flowers of rudbeckia, providing foliage contrast in spring and a splash of bright yellow flowers in summer, while in autumn, the dried dark cones of the rudbeckia flowers are silhouetted against the pale, silky ribbons of the grass seedheads, just waiting for an outline of frost. Nearby,

Phlomis samia, with its velvety grey leaves and yellow candelabra flower-spikes, grows out of cushions of *Sedum* 'Ruby Glow', whose foliage and flowers darken to a deep red as autumn approaches. And, in one of the most successful combinations of all, grey-white domes of *Anaphalis triplinervis* and clouds of the vivid mauve *Aster amellus* 'Veilchenkönigin' merge beneath the graceful arching stems of *Stipa calamagrostis*. 'See-through' plants are useful in this shimmering, shifting canvas of plants in which one species is glimpsed through another. One of Schoenaich's favourites is the Russian sage, *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', whose felty, blue-grey flowerheads last all year, contrasting particularly well with the daisy blooms of *Echinacea purpurea* in early autumn. Another is *Salvia nemorosa*, a European native whose beautiful blue flowers appear in May and

June, and again later in the year if it is cut down after the first flowering. Waves of this buffet against drifts of pale *Achillea grandiflora* 'Great Expectations', interspersed with tall swaying grasses. 'The grasses knit everything together,' says Rees. 'And the way that they move in even the slightest breeze keeps everything fluid.'

People tend to think that this sort of gardening requires a huge area, but Rees disagrees – his 20ft x 80ft London garden is turned over to it. The principles can be applied anywhere by selecting only strong species suited to the soil and site. Some of the planting combinations at Ryton could be used on a smaller scale by reducing the numbers – one ornamental grass with five ground covers, for instance, repeated throughout.

Crucial to this style are plants which extend the season with dried leaves, attractive flowerheads and seeds. Piet

Oudolf once said, only half-joking, that a plant is not worth growing unless it looks good when it is dead – and the beauty of dying flowers, frosted leaves and gaunt stems is part of the new perennial aesthetic. Echinacea, anaphalis, sedum and origanum all produce long-lasting dried flowerheads which will be appreciated by birds as well as look good, and most of the grasses will hold their heads right through winter. So resist the temptation to use the shears until February, and then it will be only a month or two before the new spring foliage starts to appear. 'For a totally year-round garden, you could fill that gap by underplanting with a carpet of spring-flowering bulbs,' says Schoenaich. 'And perhaps some alliums for early summer, when the grasses are still only about knee-high. But once they take off you really don't need anything else.' Though Schoenaich and

Rees insist it's 'not a mission' to convert this country to new perennial planting, they are excited about its potential – indeed, they have already created some innovative private gardens in Oxfordshire and Sussex. But Schoenaich, in particular, is keen to secure a public planting commission in London. With London boroughs spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on bedding schemes every year you can see her thinking what she could do with just a fraction of that. ■

Schoenaich Rees Landscape Architects (020-8994 1944). Ryton Organic Gardens, Ryton, near Coventry (02476 303517) are open daily 9-5pm. Admission £3; free for HDRA members. For a list of plants used, send an 'sae', marked 'Herbaceous perennials', to the Information and Education Department