

LAYERS OF LIGHT

Marion Jay

I have a weakness for kinetic plants. When I say kinetic, I mean those which move in the wind, suspend myriad droplets after rain, and shimmer in sunshine. When I say weakness, I mean I'm liable to walk into a lamp-post if I catch sight of one of these plants growing in someone's front garden.

Kinetic plants are very often transparent, with slender stems and a branching habit, the taller ones useful both for height at the back of the border and also at the front, as a gauze through which to glimpse other plants. Most of these plants reach their kinetic stage in high summer. Camassias, however, erupt in a cool haze of blue and white star-shaped flowers earlier in the year, looking particularly effective amongst meadow grasses in May. Hot on their heels are the early-flowering ornamental grasses, amongst them annuals like *Hordeum jubatum*, the Foxtail Grass, with its rosy-edged, feather-like flowerheads, and diminutive *Agrostis nebulosa*, Cloud Grass, which weaves its way between other plants like a low-lying mist, a fuzz of tiny, fibre-optic flowers which reflect the sunlight. Both enjoy a well-drained, sunny site and self-seed if happy.

In June, richly-coloured heucheras begin to throw up their beaded stalks. My favourite of these is dark-leaved *Heuchera* 'Prince'. In summer, it produces long stiff stems bearing large (for a heuchera) creamy lime-green flowers, which contrast perfectly with the purple-black sheen of its ruffled-edged foliage, much more eye-catching than the smaller, off-white flowers of *H.* 'Palace Purple' or 'Obsidian'. Best grown in semi-shade to maintain the velvety dark colour, like many heucheras, *H.* 'Prince' is easy to propagate in summer by simply cutting a piece of stem-tip about 10cm long and pushing it into a pot of gritty compost. Kept in a shaded, sheltered place, the cutting will root in a few weeks.

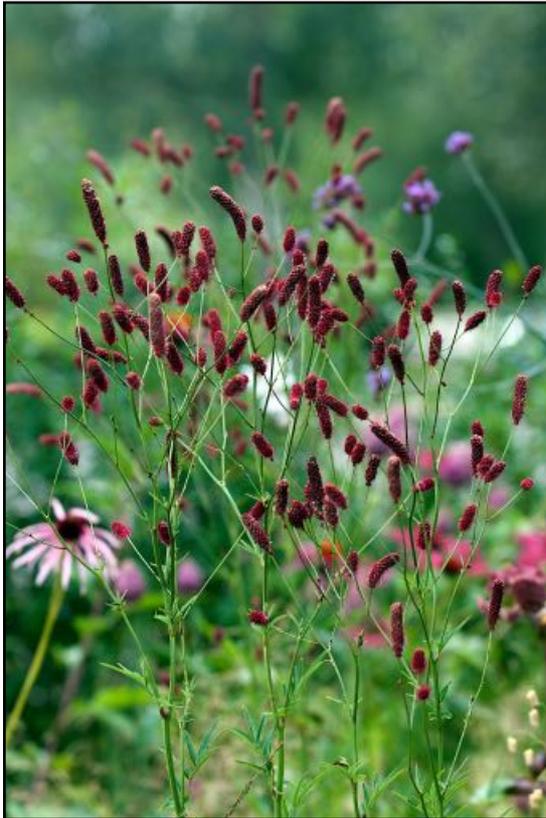
By July, the big guns are blazing! In a veritable forest of filmy foliage, verbena, thalictrum, sanguisorba and ammi float effortlessly above their more substantial counterparts in the border. One of the most commonly-grown kinetic plants is *Verbena bonariensis*. Long-flowering, with stiff stems and soft mauve flowers, it is a magnet for bees and butterflies and self-seeds easily. This year, I grew a new form of verbena which came highly recommended by eco-nurserywoman Marina Christopher; *Verbena macdougalii* 'Lavender Spires'. It resembles *V. hastata*, but it grows taller and is sterile, flowering for much longer yet still producing enough nectar, despite its sterility, to attract a steady stream of bees. I can report that it's definitely a winner.

Thalictrum has an ethereal quality to it which brings an airy, light feel to the border. I have grown *Thalictrum delavayi* 'Album' from seed and the intricacy of the flowers, from pearly little buds to tiny snowy skirts held on branching stems, never fails to charm me. They prefer a dampish soil in semi-shade, though if the soil is really moist they will be happy in full sun. Sanguisorbas are low-maintenance, long-lived plants, enjoying similar conditions to thalictrum and reaching heights of anything from 1ft to 5ft. Those originating from *S. officianalis* produce dark red bobble-like flowers on strong stems in late summer, which persist through autumn and provide a striking winter silhouette.



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Thalictrum delavayi 'Album'



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Sanguisorba
'Raspberry Coulis'



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Molinia caerulea ssp. *arundinacea*
'Transparent'

Sanguisorba is a perfect foil for annual *Ammi majus*, a plant which has won my heart in recent years. Who can resist its lacy green and white umbels, so much finer than any perennial white-flowered umbellifer? Yes, it's a nuisance to get going, especially as it can sulk if planted out prematurely or too late, particularly if it has become pot-bound, but I wouldn't be without it. I cannot include *Ammi visnaga* amongst the kinetics, however, as it is an altogether denser plant with a solidity that sets it apart. Still worth growing, nevertheless, for its exceptional flower-heads, so beloved of florists. Talking of annuals, I grew dill from seed this year and it has offset the violet-blue flowers of *Verbena* 'Lavender Spires' beautifully in an oscillating layer of yellow-green, unexpectedly lofty at 4ft.

No kinetic border would be complete without one of the tall varieties of *Molinia*. These trouble-free ornamental grasses definitely add a wow factor to late summer, with evocative names such as 'Skyracer' and 'Windspiel'. My favourite is *Molinia caerulea* ssp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent' (excuse me while I put my teeth back in). Springing from a mound of lush foliage, initially its branching stems are upright but as they expand they curve outwards, creating wide archways shimmering with minuscule flowerheads. An arresting sight, particularly after rain when tiny cabouchon droplets ornament every filigree branch. I have discovered it has a convenient habit of 'self-detaching' its flowering stems at the base, so they can be easily removed in February with just a gentle pull.

One of my favourite shrubs elegantly graces the border; the exquisite *Indigofera pendula*. Although it requires free-draining soil and a sheltered position, this exceptional plant is well worth the trouble. Sometimes described as wisteria in shrub form, *I. pendula* has an arching habit with dainty, pinnate leaves and long, trailing racemes of pink-lilac pea-like flowers in mid to late summer. I've noticed that it has the endearing habit of closing its leaves, prayer-like, in the evening. I bought mine as a rooted cutting from Derry Watkins, who says *I. pendula* isn't always hardy in the coldest winters, but cuttings take readily and can be over-wintered in a cold-frame as an insurance policy.