

# Plumping up the border

Derry Watkins

Twelve years ago we bought a derelict barn surrounded by derelict fields. After we'd converted the barn to a house, my architect husband began designing the garden. On a steep south-facing slope, it needed terracing to level off a few areas. With the help of a digger he created sweeping curves outlined in box and low stone walls.

Rather to my horror, it already looked rather beautiful when he had finished – a circle of grass bitten out of a gravelled terrace and bulging into a crescent of water. The beds were empty but looked somehow stylish (fig. 1). As soon as I began planting (fortunately, as he has no interest in plants, I could do what I liked with them) the beds looked far worse. Instead of nice, neat, newly dug earth, we had sporadic clumps of this and that sticking out like sore thumbs. I knew in time they would grow together and fill the space, but meanwhile we had to look at it every day. I wanted to fill it with sweeps of colour immediately. (I am an impatient gardener.)



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Fig. 1 The shape of the garden in March, with Lunaria 'Corfu Blue' in bloom

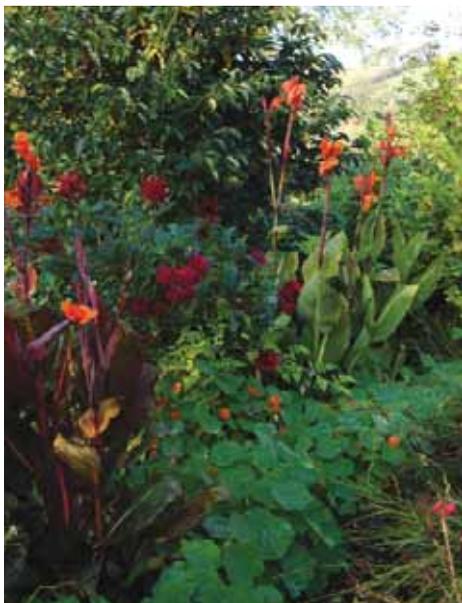


Fig. 2 *Canna* 'Durban', *C.* 'Striata', *Nasturtium* 'Hermione Grashof', *Dahlia* 'Nuit d'Ete'

My first thought was annuals – but most of them don't bloom for long enough. I did not want a month of colour, I wanted five months of colour! If I had known about it, I would have planted Pictorial Meadows Mix over it all and have had what looks like a sea of wild flowers for four months – the Mix is a mix of annuals carefully selected to give a sequence of brilliant colour for the whole summer.

But Pictorial Meadows Mix did not exist then, so my thoughts quickly turned to tender perennials, which are my first love anyway (fig. 2). They outbloom any hardy plant by a factor of about ten to one. Virtually every tender perennial will bloom for at least three months, often for six! So that first summer I filled the garden with salvias, argyranthemums, double nasturtiums,

dahlias, cannas, bidens, osteospermums and sanvitalias. Fortunately I had a nursery to forage in, but with a little forethought and a sharp knife in the previous September you can propagate all the tender perennials you could wish for. I would not want to plant out a garden of just tender perennials every year, but I would not be without their drama and profusion of colour throughout the season.

I did use some annuals. I needed some height in this brand new expanse of garden, and there are a few annuals which can get to 1.3 to 1.5m in three months. For filling gaps, there is nothing to touch *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Purity' (fig. 3), its enormous, white, simple flowers on fine leaves will fill all the space it can find. *Nicandra physalodes* (fig. 4) is an instant shrub, 1.3–1.5m from a March sowing; it looks too robust to be an annual. If you cut it and take it inside when it dies, it holds its beautiful seedpods on an elegant Japanese structure of twigs all winter.

To get real height and drama from annuals, try sowing them in September and overwinter them frost-free. Plant them out in April and they will be monsters by June. Glorious! But they won't last all summer. You should sow another batch in April to flower from July onwards; they won't get so big but they will carry on the show through September.

For even bigger plants, try sowing hardy biennials and short-lived perennials in June to bloom the following year. The biennials will be in flower earlier than



Fig. 3 *Salvia turkestanica*, *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Purity' and *Ricinus* 'New Zealand Purple'

most annuals (and onopordums will give you all the height you could want, easily 2.5–3m in a season). Some biennials will last an extra year or two if you deadhead them early, Sweet Williams and angelicas especially. One of our lunarias has forgotten to be biennial. It flowers, then comes up again from short suckers which bloom sporadically though the rest of the year. My first plant is now four years old with a woody trunk! A lovely soft blue, it seems to be the dominant form on some Greek islands – 5 years ago seed was sent from both Corfu and Paxos – and it comes entirely true. We call it *Lunaria* 'Corfu Blue' (fig. 5).

Not quite biennial, but not quite perennial either, are the short-lived perennials, living for 3, 4 or 5 years. They are wonderful for filling gaps and then gracefully giving way when your more treasured permanent plants grow. And of course they can be used to fill the dreadful gaps when the cardoons are cut back or something dies on you. Best of all for me are erysimums, so easy to propagate, so quick to fill gaps. And now in so many colours. The pink and cream form of erysimum, 'Pastel Patchwork', planted alongside brown grasses and apricot heucheras, is to die for (fig. 6). The rich red-purples of *E.* 'Parish's' (fig. 7) are amazing scrambling through the grey leaves of the shrubby *Lupinus arboreus* white-flowered (fig. 8). Gauras (fig. 9) and agastaches (fig. 10) and sphaeralceas (fig. 11) are some of the most floriferous plants in my garden. If the drainage is good

Fig. 4 *Nicandra physalodes*Fig. 5 *Lunaria* 'Corfu Blue'

(or the winters not too wet) they will often go on for several years; but even if not, they are so quick to grow and so long in bloom it is well worth propagating them every year.

After a year of so, self-sowing plants take over from the carefully nurtured babies I have been putting out. *Linaria purpurea* 'Canon Went', *Tragopogon crocifolius* (fig. 12), *Geranium pyrenaicum* 'Bill Wallis', *Papaver rhoeas* Mother of Pearl Group and *Verbena bonariensis* come in great drifts, tying the garden together with a generosity that I cannot begin to match. They don't flower for



Fig. 6 *Carex flagellifera*, *Erysimum* 'Pastel Patchwork' and *Heuchera* 'Caramel' with 'Queen of the Night' and 'White Triumphator' tulips.

more than a month or so, but they appear and disappear so gracefully, filling gaps you didn't know you had. The only things to be wary of are self-seeders which are difficult to dig up (violets, *Alchemilla mollis*, wild strawberry), and those which self-sow so thickly that they crowd other plants out (like *Nigella* and *Limnanthes*), so make sure you start with a form you really like. It's no more difficult to grow white California poppies than orange ones. But if you let the original wild form in, you will soon have only orange. As long as you only have the one you want, it can only cross with itself and give you more of the same. It is worth the effort to start with a beautiful variety: it should grow just as well as a common one.

In shade my favourite self-seeder is *Corydalis ochroleuca* – fine leaves and pale cream flowers for months. To my amazement, *Anemanthele lessoniana* (syn. *Stipa arundinacea*), which I have always grown in sunny, dry conditions (when it turns beautiful shades of bronze) has begun self-seeding in the woods. You would hardly recognise it, a shimmering silky green airy froth, just beautiful.

It's very tempting to think "Oh, I'll just cover it all with ground cover", but except where you want a carpet of one plant I would be wary of anything described as ground cover. It is probably an aggressive thug and you will spend more time and energy digging it out than you would have spent planting twenty more accommodating plants. 'A weed by any other name...' On the other hand, I did deliberately plant two thugs in my garden – *Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta*



Fig. 7 *Erysimum* 'Parish's'



Fig. 8 *Lupinus arboreus* white-flowered



Fig. 9 *Gaura lindheimeri*



Fig. 10 *Agastache* 'Painted Lady'



Fig. 11 *Sphaeralcea* 'Childerley'



Fig. 12 *Tragopogon crocifolius*

'Feeseey' (a slightly more refined gardeners' garters) and *Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker'. I put them together so the dark leaves of the lysimachias push through the white grass. By diligently cutting them to the ground twice a year and digging out the excess every spring, I've kept them in check for nine years. But I am tired of fighting, and they will have to go. Likewise the glorious white rosebay willowherb, beautiful in flower and in seed, after slowly increasing for several years is suddenly off on the rampage. It has to go from the garden, but I am going to try it in long grass, which keeps my macleaya in check beautifully.

Better than ground cover are hardy perennial plants which cover a lot of ground in a year, but don't root as they go so they don't try to take over the garden. For me, three of the best are geraniums: Rozanne – big blue flowers with a white eye, best in a little shade; 'Mavis Simpson' – sheets of pink in full sun; and Patricia – a waterfall of deep pink. They all have the same generous habit, flowering from June to October, but dying back to a neat core in the winter.

Thalictrums all have beautiful foliage and give height and grace. *T. delavayi* 'Album' is elegant and refined. *T. 'Elin'* (fig. 13), the biggest of the lot, has particularly beautiful purple-flushed new growth in spring. It makes a transparent hedge – a dividing line through my biggest border, a veil that interrupts the view without obscuring it, and increases the sense of depth. And last year I grew *T.*

'Splendide' which is like *T. delavayi* on steroids – taller darker stems, more flowers for longer. It must have a drawback somewhere, but I haven't found it.

I didn't realise it when I began this garden, but one of the easiest ways to get instant height is to use grasses, especially miscanthus. Very upright, self-supporting, they immediately grow to 1.5–2m and stay there. They don't get



Fig. 13 *Thalictrum* 'Elin', *Liatris spicata*, *Salvia* 'Caradonna' and *Linaria* 'Canon Went'

bigger and bigger like trees, they don't require pruning like hedges. The books say to cut them down in March – but why bother? They do fine, and look fine without it, flower heads having turned to a tracery but still standing tall in May with the new leaves pushing up from below. By the time the new flowerheads come through, the old ones have more or less vanished.

The quickest shrubs I have ever grown are *Eleagnus* 'Quicksilver' (instant clouds of silver, but no one told me it was deciduous – I thought it was dying when the first hard frost shrivelled its leaves – and the black-leaved elders. And they look sumptuous together, bouncing the light back and forth.

Actually, as the years pass, my problem is not how to fill the empty spaces but how to find space to plant all the wonderful new plants I keep buying. Fortunately some of the short-lived perennials are now committing suicide and I am getting more hard-hearted about pulling out the self-sowers. But I can see the day coming soon when I let slip those terrible words, "I need more garden". 🌱

**Derry Watkins's** love affair with colour can be seen in her garden, which is open weekly April–October and for the NGS monthly June–October, at her nursery, Special Plants, near Bath. For details of opening, and seedlists and plant catalogues, see [www.specialplants.net](http://www.specialplants.net) or tel: 01225 891686.