

The show must go on

Emma Seniuk

As an ‘ornamental gardener’, I work in the firm belief that the garden beds should be a delight to view from foliage to flower to seedhead. To achieve such intensity many players may be used, and succession planting helps achieve the goal. Layers of bulbs, perennials, self-sowers, biennials, woody shrubs and trees are used as the ingredients of a multi-tiered confection and, when mixed correctly, provide peaks of flower and form, a construction of contrasting colour and shape capable of keeping interest throughout the year.

I first became aware of succession planting from the writing of the late Christopher Lloyd, whose books and garden are testament to his exceptional plantsmanship. *Succession Planting* has proven to be the definitive reference book on the subject, but nothing compares to witnessing and working the magic first hand. It is with immense pleasure that I am a student at his gardens for experimentation, Great Dixter in East Sussex, under the guidance of head gardener Fergus Garrett and, as one of many students, I am taught a variety of gardening practices, including the complexities of knitting together a dynamic floral tapestry. Gardening at Great Dixter has taught me the importance of being a more reactive and sensitive gardener, and how to craft plantings thoughtfully, so that every plant has its moment in the sun.

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Succession planting is the key to keeping the long border – seen here in April/May – vibrant from April into November.

With the brooding deep-green colour of *Taxus baccata* hedges as our backdrop, first comes the great push of spring ephemerals and bulbs. Shy hellebore hybrids reveal their pastel flowers, then tulips as big as teacups sway in the breeze atop the garden beds. *Allium cristophii* emerges and adds notable rhythm and strong seedheads into autumn. Tulips such as *Tulipa* ‘Ballerina’, *T.* ‘Red Shine’ and *T.* ‘Rem’s Favourite’ are often paired with *Myosotis sylvatica*, which is either a gentle self-sower or, when left to seed heavily into summer, can become a mat of foliage. Properly thinned out and planted in the larger spaces between perennials in early winter, the forget-me-nots’ frothy blue flowers fill the spaces and coexist with sleepy perennials, making an ideal foil to candy-coloured tulips. Add the chartreuse zing of *Euphorbia polychroma* ‘Major’ to the mix (fig. 3), and the vivacious colour is enough to chase away even the deepest winter doldrums. As summer arrives, the myosotis is taken out once the seed has begun to disperse and either advancing perennials or new bedding fill the gaps.

Perhaps the classic example of succession planting is *Galanthus nivalis* placed near the base of a fern, such as *Dryopteris*. The pair calls for elegant timing so the snowdrops serenely finish flowering as the fern fronds unfurl to conceal the dying foliage. In early or mid-winter the fern is cut back, leaving space for the snowdrop to re-emerge, and the process begins again. To give early spring interest, snowdrops may be planted in any empty and unused space which even an energetic gardener would never fork over, such as beneath a shrub or small tree. In a smaller bed at Dixter, another of my favourite bulb combinations is *Narcissus tazetta* kicking off the spring season then, as it senesces, a small colony of *Eucomis comosa* ‘Sparkling Burgundy’ emerges to provide strong shape through the summer and autumn.



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The long border in May/June.

Even the most reliable, indispensable plants can be spiced up by a good companion, and many structurally sound shrubs are the perfect candidate for a flowering climber. Once an early-summer-flowering shrub such as *Pittosporum tobira* is finished, an opportunity arises for a friendly clematis to work its way towards the limelight. The shrub provides a framework for the vine to give an encore of blooms to what otherwise would have been foliage for the remainder of the season. Such cohabitation should be monitored, however, as an aggressive vine can injure the unfortunate shrub over time. Across the path from the famous long border is one of my favourite shrub and clematis partnerships, stocky *Fuchsia* ‘Riccartonii’ with wiry *Clematis x eriostemon*. They flower simultaneously for several months in summer, their bold blooms splayed out like the skirts of flamenco dancers, joining instead of passing one another.

As the seasons unfold, I’ve seen layers of plants used to make maximum use of border space. In late spring, *Papaver orientale*, a summer-dormant perennial, was cut back. Then *Tagetes* ‘Cinnabar’ was planted between the *Papaver* crowns to keep the space full of colour. In the barn garden, *Crocus tommasinianus* flowers with *Galanthus* ‘S. Arnott’, followed by a light sprinkling of *Narcissus* ‘Hawera’ amongst the pink blooms of *Prunus tenella*. As the prunus finishes flowering, perennial *Centaurea montana* takes centre stage and flowers unabashed for three to four weeks. When the centaurea blooms fade an opportunity arises: the cornflower is cut back and annuals are dropped into the spaces for the final act.

Some of the best combinations are incidental. Self-sowers are some of the most endearing characters in the garden and are often found tucked into an opening in the wall

or along the garden path, looking fabulous in a place the gardener may never have imagined. However, the devil-may-care nature of self-sowers, if they’re not controlled, can easily upset the plant community by rubbing out their neighbours. The gardener may require a heavy hand when thinning out *Arums*, *Fennel* or *Atriplex hortensis* var. *rubra*, to name but a few. With self-sowers, constant adjustment is necessary to maintain balance in the bed, but the element of surprise they bring is indispensable. *Lychnis coronaria*, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Erigeron karvinskianus* and *Leucanthemum vulgare* – none of these prolific plants is bulky enough to carry the weight of a bed alone, but they do provide layers of interest, and contribute to the dynamic nature of the garden from year to year.

Annuals are another powerful tool for pumping up the life of a garden display. They are used to prolong the show and can be planted in the gaps between

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Fig. 3 Tulips with *Myosotis sylvatica*, and *Euphorbia polychroma* ‘Major’

perennials which are shrinking into dormancy – perennials such as *Hemerocallis* may have their straggly foliage combed to one side, revealing spaces into which wide-spreading cosmos and marigold are tucked. Exuberant and exotic plants, annuals are often stored in the greenhouses or have frost-free protection over the winter months. Others are grown in our nursery from seed or cuttings. All are potted on throughout the spring to prepare us and them for the excitement ahead. Punchy marigolds, sultry *Scabiosa atropurpurea* ‘Ace of Spades’ and the almost frivolous *Persicaria orientalis* are dotted through beds or used, guns blazing, en masse in bedding areas. The sheen of *Papaver somniferum* catches the sunlight and free-flowering *Cosmos bipinnatus* floats effortlessly into October.

A variety of biennials is also used at Great Dixter. This was an entirely new concept for me, and I was fascinated to see the first-year rosettes quickly become strong ornamental strokes in their second year. In the spring, sweet mauve flowers of old-fashioned *Lunaria annua* punctuate developing vegetation. *Oenothera glazioviana* gives a show with papery lemon-scented flowers from spring into summer, and *Verbascum olympicum* stands tall in sections of the garden like celebratory torches of summer (fig. 4). Sometimes lined out for reserve in our stock beds, but often just popped into spaces as we work through the garden, biennials, which bloom triumphantly together, add further cohesion to the planting. In the hotter months of the year *Dipsacus fullonum* leans its arms out of the beds (fig. 5), and steely *Eryngium giganteum*, ‘Miss Wilmott’s Ghost’ flashes its silvery bracts to passers-by. Some biennials hang about until frosty mornings. The structural brown teasel stalks and the transparent, almost mineral, oval Honestly seedheads keep the show going even after we’ve closed our gates to visitors.

The borders within Great Dixter are more multi-layered than I’ve seen anywhere else. If I had to pick my favourite example of succession planting, however, it would be the



Fig. 4 *Verbascum olympicum* stands tall

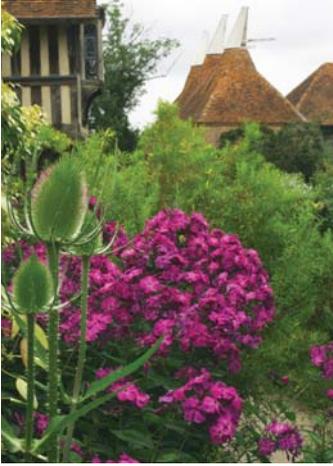


Fig. 5 Teasels work through several seasons

wild-flower meadows. Ever changing and intricately diverse, each piece of meadow at Dixter has its own composition, knitted together by the introduction of hay rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, a semi-parasitic plant which weakens the grass to open up areas for seedlings to set. Patchworks of *Crocus vernus* hybrids, old-fashioned *Narcissus* and *Camassia quamash* succumb to the myriad of grasses in the spring. *Lotus corniculatus*, *Leontodon autumnalis* and *Centaurea nigra* bloom throughout the summer months. Tiny orchids, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and *Orchis morio*, are jewels for discerning eyes. Meadows are possibly the most obvious and accessible examples of succession in nature, at times a riot of colour and at others subdued tones.

Creating relationships between plants can be a great game. Like the host at a dinner party with an unlikely range of characters at the table, the gardener is able to toy with the chemistry of material which would never rub shoulders naturally. And the closeness of succession planting allows for an intimacy, an interaction of colour harmonies and clashes, complements of shape and texture, all adding to the unfolding drama. With the energy to experiment, the gardener knows that the combinations are as endless as his or her imagination. Above all, it's always beneficial to revise and adjust. A garden is never static and requires a helping hand to add, reduce, or remove all at once, and try anew. New ideas and knowledge are gained from each passing season so that we are able to create dynamic compositions from year to year, providing consistent interest and appeal. And after all the work, we must always lean on our spades and consider how to make the garden even better. 🌱

Emma Seniuk has wide horticultural experience for her years, including a season at Mt Cuba Center, Delaware, and a two-year Professional Gardener Program at Longwood Gardens, Pennsylvania. As the first North American Christopher Lloyd Scholar, Emma is spending a spirited year at Great Dixter studying the craftsmanship of gardening.

Dixter has a long tradition of training young gardeners. Some are studying horticulture or landscape design as part of formal courses, others come purely to improve their practical skills. The Christopher Lloyd Scholarship, part of the Historic and Botanic Garden Bursary Scheme (HBGBS) offers a slightly more formal pathway. Trainees stay at Dixter for a year and have to complete weekly plant ID tests, a horticultural diary and 4 projects during their time at Dixter. The next scholarship place will be advertised in April through the HBGBS and Dixter websites.

Dixter also runs many events and one-day courses. See www.greatdixter.co.uk