

It seems to me . . .

Television garden shows have been in the doldrums these last ten years and more. The fashion for ‘instant gardens’, as pushed by Alan Titchmarsh and his Groundforce team, caught the public imagination. Say what you like, they brought a younger demographic to the garden-loving world, and spawned a host of other garden shows, keeping gardens in the news. Now we’re back to Gardeners’ World and its attendant audience of old fogeys!

Is there really any reason why the public should not be able to expect, if not an instant garden, then at least one which provides a little colour in Year 1 and a full-on display from Year 2 onwards? I don’t believe there is, and further, I believe gardens composed almost entirely of herbaceous perennials and grasses, are the answer! As Hardy Planters well know, they are:

- Cheap, especially if bought in 9cm pots
- Largely free of pests and diseases
- Quick to establish
- Low maintenance
- Undemanding and tolerant of many soil types, and offer enormous variety and huge variations in growth habit and heights.

Of course, there are a few other vital ingredients which must be added to the mix to ensure quality alongside speed. There must be:

- Good ground preparation.
- Commitment by the gardener
- Adequate care, especially in Year 1
- A minimal but important level of understanding of the basic principles of gardening.

One of the questions I am most frequently asked by visitors to our Sussex Prairie Garden is, “Will plant x grow on my heavy clay/acid/alkaline/sandy/etc. soil?” It is important to remember that gardening is not rocket science, and an overly scientific approach to their gardens tends to provide would-be gardeners with an excuse to do nothing! Far better to get out there, get digging, and forget about what pH your soil is! Prepare the soil as best you can, enrich it with



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Prairie inferno – to be closely followed by a 15cm compost mulch

manure and compost and drain it if necessary. So, you make a few mistakes, kill a few plants! So what! Buy some new plants, take some new cuttings, and learn. The great explorers did not trek to the ends of the earth for nothing, so embrace their zeal, vigour and fervour and be your own planthunter. You can be caught up in the chase and make pilgrimages to specialist nurseries which are veritable treasure troves of temptation. Plant Fairs, as well, can answer your heart's desires and are the sweetshops of plant lovers.

Another thing that we have been accused of is “Breaking the Rules”. I believe that a bit of rule breaking is a good thing and will also help encourage younger people to garden. Gardening, and garden design, are littered with dos and don'ts passed down over the centuries, many of which are best ignored! Here are a few examples of rules I have broken and got away with!

Circles within squares do not work.

Apparently, this is a strict rule of garden design. Pauline and I, as great lovers of curves, have broken this in most gardens we have designed, including our own.

Dahlias should be lifted in autumn and kept dry and frost-free over the winter.

I worked for 12 years in Luxembourg, where the continental climate meant winter lows of -25°C . The dahlias I left in situ all winter survived without problems.

Gardens should be neat and tidy.

Ever since I saw my grandfather tying daffodil leaves into neat knots, I have abhorred the overly tidy garden. I now know about the wildlife benefits of a less-than-perfectly-tidy garden as well. The remains of the summer's rotting leaves provide our herbaceous plants with a good deal of frost protection, as well as eventually becoming humus. Sculptural architectural shapes of the grass seedheads, beautiful in their own right, are a veritable food larder for birds over the winter months. Rarely had that frosty-morning ice kingdom awe? No wonder, in the past you would have cut them down well before the frost came. Now we can learn to relax, chill, and give the seedheads time to shine!

Small plants at the front and big plants at the back of the border.

This is another convention we prefer to consign to the compost heap. As long as you are prepared to have a certain number of small paths in your borders, there is no reason to follow this directive.

Our very own garden is a great place to see the results of our rule breaking. We also like to find ways of reducing labour, and this led to our 'slash & burn' approach to the annual clear-up. With a six-acre garden, with around 40,000 herbaceous perennials, cutting down and clearing last year's growth could be a mammoth task. This is why we simply wait for a strong east wind and set fire to the entire garden! What used to be a six-week task, now takes us a couple of days. It's also great fun! 🌿 **Paul McBride**

Sussex Prairies Garden is open daily June – mid-October. It is a venue for the HPS Study Day, *Stars of Late Summer*, on Saturday 25th August 2012, and hosts an Unusual Plant & Art Fair in September. See www.sussexprairies.co.uk