

Better borders

Bob Brown in conversation with Sibylle Kreutzberger

Have you ever sat looking at a border in your garden and been less than satisfied or realised that something is wrong but not known what, or how, to remedy it?

Bob Brown spoke to expert border-maker Sibylle Kreutzberger (who together with Pam Schwerdt was jointly head gardener at Sissinghurst, starting in Vita Sackville-West's time in 1959 and ending in 1991) to discover what practical advice she had to share, based on her years of experience working on some of the best borders in the world.

Plant in groups of similar colour

Sibylle: In my experience, it's all about how your eye sees the border. It's mostly about shape, colour, and texture. Take colour. Sometimes it's a good idea to group plants together in the border that have similarly coloured flowers.

In Sibylle's garden in May, *Paeonia mlokosewitschii*, *Euphorbia polychroma* 'Major', a yellow viridiflora tulip, golden thyme and a box pyramid star, and inject

© George Parker



Use dominant colours with care – in the Yellow Garden, the dominant yellow-flowering plants are grouped together. The red flowers are at the front.

stability and oomph at a thin time of year. Take care! If the plants flower together they are likely to go over together leaving a big hole. So Sibylle has separated them with plants which will continue the yellow theme but flower later, like yellow *Hemerocallis lilioasphodelus*, the cream shrub rose ‘Windrush’, and a cream tall bearded iris with an orange flash. When you view the garden in any season the gaps between the individual members of this chorus will disappear because the eye has an uncanny ability to draw plants together if they are within nodding distance but not actually touching, so that what’s apparently the same area will be effective later with a new combination and the grouping will continue its role.

Keep red close

Sibylle: Red and yellow draw the human eye. Red is most dominant. Keep it close. If you put it at the end of the border, that’s where the eye will go straight away, skating over all your efforts in between. Use it to stop the eye in stages.

Use dominant colours with care

Sibylle: If yellow is scattered throughout the border (rather than grouped) the whole composition becomes spotty and the eye doesn’t know where to go, where to linger. This applies only to dominant colours.

I know this is true. I have a border spotted with orange welsh poppies (*Meconopsis cambrica*) and the peppering makes the border look chaotic. I know another border where in April and May all the work put into designing, planting and maintaining a bed fronting the road is destroyed by bluebells which have proved ineradicable.

Conversely, more recessive colours scattered throughout the border can bestow unity where there was chaos before. In Sibylle’s garden, fritillaries flower across the bottom of the garden and the soft puce-purple flowers are like threads linking the separate parts.



© Pam Ratcliffe

Don't fight colour schemes you are already stuck with – the South Cottage walls are orangey brick and the cottage garden in front of it has a sunset colours theme.

Don't fight colour schemes you are already stuck with

Sibylle: Walls and paving often have colour. If you like pink and yellow together put yellow in front of your pink fletton brick house.

However, both Sibylle and I have a strong visceral dislike of this colour combination. A big coloured tree like the yellow *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia' may equally dominate the garden and you'll need to work with it. I just hope that you don't have a pink brick house as well. At Sissinghurst the South Cottage walls are orangey brick and the cottage garden in front of it has a sunset-colours theme.

Make sure you have a supporting cast

Sibylle: Be daring by mixing clashing colours if you like, but remember that throughout the border you need a cast of duller plants like *Tellima grandiflora*, *Polygonatum odoratum*, *Silene fimbriata*, *Fuchsia 'Hawkshead'* and *Epimedium grandiflorum* 'White Queen'.

Sibylle calls them "third-time-round plants" because you need calm between the spikes of stardom. Excitement in gardens is fine but gardens should be restful as well.

© Bob Brown



Think about shapes – in this border in an Irish garden, the colours are perfectly matched but the shapes are too similar.

Plant in ones

Sibylle: The common advice is to plant in groups of threes or fives. In most gardens this advice is excessive.

My own garden is quite small so it can accommodate single plants yet the planting appears big enough when viewed closely – which is inevitable in a small garden. If you have a big garden and the border is viewed from 50 metres away across a croquet lawn, though, you might need groups of as much as sevens or nines.

If you follow Sibylle's advice and plant in groups of similar colour you'll get the best of both worlds – patches of colour and variety of shape. Bear in mind that you'll also be able to indulge your love of plants. However, remember that “more of less is more effective”.

Think about shapes

Sibylle: Plant mauve, purple and violet *Hesperis matronalis*, ornamental alliums and flag irises together. The hues are similar – which holds the group together – but the



© Pam Ratcliffe

Try colour-themed borders – the acid-green flowers of euphorbias, considered as foliage, are wonderful with many colours.

shapes are different so it works. However, if you put the *hesperis* with similarly shaped *Erysimum ‘Bowles’s Mauve’* and *Camassia quamash* the effect would blur.

I know a famous garden in Ireland where immense thought has gone into immaculate colour matching but the shapes are so similar that the whole point of many of the borders has been lost.

Try colour-themed borders

Sibylle and Pam helped realise Vita Sackville-West’s idea of the white garden at Sissinghurst. This garden began a surge of interest in creating colour-themed gardens.

Sibylle: Creating any colour-themed garden is a challenge, not just a matter of collecting plants of your chosen hue. Take white. Whites are often not very white. Many are grubby, or in spring, often cream, such as *Rodgersia podophylla*, *Maianthemum canadense* and *Kniphofia ‘Little Maid’*. They have nothing to say to one another, and one has to make a choice. Plant shapes become more important than you could ever realise, as does the foliage. Is the foliage green or grey, shiny or broad?

© Pam Ratcliffe



Make the most of foliage – a variety of foliage shape, colour and texture adds significant interest to the White Garden.

You have to concentrate on texture and shape to distinguish plants from each other because you don't want to end up with a jumble. Ordinary plants like bergenias that are often dismissed literally, or simply by the eye, become immensely important. The acid-green flowers of euphorbias, considered as foliage, are wonderful with white and many other colours.

Make the most of foliage

Sibylle: Foliage is always important because it has something to say most of the time. The border is literally held together by the plants which edge it. Changes of shape, colour and texture add as much interest as any flower, last longer than any flower and transform shady areas. Big-foliage plants such as hostas, acanthus or tall bearded iris leaves leaven borders where the foliage textures are too similar. I would claim that it's the lack of definition in borders where foliage texture is homogeneous that is the most common fault with borders where the owner is dissatisfied. Big foliage often remedies it. Foliage becomes even more important if you don't have much time to garden. Plump for good plants such as *Hosta plantaginea* var. *japonica*, *Dictamnus albus*, *Selinum wallichianum*, *Bergenia* 'Beethoven' and *Iris* 'White Swirl', which offer good foliage as well as good flower. Avoid plants whose foliage offers little, like *Lychnis chalcedonica*.

Plant some full stops

Sibylle: Some famous borders are still not quite there. Take the long parallel herbaceous borders at RHS Wisley that lead up to Battleston Hill. These are a delight to visit from late spring to the end of autumn – full of well-grown interesting plants. But, the plants lack shape contrasts (they're mostly mounds or appear to be mounds because they're overgrown), the colour groupings are barely evident and there's nothing to give the borders bounce, nothing to stop the eye before moving on, not even repetition which might give the border rhythm. So, if for instance the RHS was to put in a full stop every 20 metres or so (like a box cube) it would give both unity and metre and allow for unicity between the cubes as well as providing shape, contrast and gravitas.

In Sibylle's small garden the full stops are a mixture of box pyramids, groupings of yellow flowers, and both *Bergenia* 'Ballawley' and tall bearded iris foliage. Obscure the view of any one of these with your thumb and the composition falls flat.

The need for maintenance

Sibylle: Deadheading is essential. It makes the plants look more orderly and encourages further flowering. Alternatively, you might consider cutting the entire plant to ground level when it's finished flowering. Good candidates for this are plants like hardy geraniums and aquilegias which will then refurbish themselves as tumps of



Plant some full stops – here the clipped evergreens.

fresh foliage and you'll be able to see the plants behind. Staking is also essential. If you do it you'll get better value from your plants because they'll last longer in better condition, and, you can get more plants in! Hazel twigs are good, birch less so. Staking is an art and should be invisible! (I use Link Stakes or something similar.)

Sibylle recommends planting early flowerers like hellebores, daffodils and wood anemones at the back where they'll become hidden as the season moves forward. Sibylle's garden is tidy. Tidy gardens can be soulless. Hers isn't soulless because it has controlled disorder – *Smyrnium perfoliatum* leaking on to paths and those swathes of self-seeded fritillaries.

Dont expect to get it right immediately

Sibylle: Don't worry if you are never quite satisfied. We were never quite satisfied at Sissinghurst. 

Bob Brown is a plantsman with opinions who selects, trials, sells, talks and writes.

He likes to provoke because other people's opinions are useful.