

# Public space

**Kelly Baldry**

Great gardens may inspire us, preserve our heritage and enhance the fabric of our nation, but usually they're seen and appreciated by the individual only briefly. Meanwhile our towns and cities are made up of tens of thousands of individuals, many of whom will never pay to visit a garden.

It is the view that greets the vast majority of us every day that is important, made up of the spaces that surround us, shaping our immediate environment. The trip to the local supermarket, the school run, or the route into town are the repeated journeys which reinforce our experience of our immediate surroundings, good or bad. And when we arrive at our destination, it is the outlook from the office desk, or the glimpse of green space while walking between buildings, that contributes to our own personal environment.

It is precisely these views that I class as 'public space' – defined as an area which the general public have access to, or work at, on a daily basis. The scope is therefore wide ranging, and includes private businesses such as offices, hotels, public

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Fig. 1 Hugglescote Surgery, an example of a public space.

houses/restaurants, retail outlets and petrol stations, and public facilities including colleges, surgeries and hospitals. I also include areas that are in public ownership, managed by local authorities – parks, playgrounds and town centres.

So why are the majority of our public spaces so uninspiring, lacking vitality and dynamism, without any hint of design? The planting of most public spaces (with a few notable exceptions) gives the appearance of bland functionality, and as such are immediately forgettable.

While we are aware of the changing seasons, much of our public space planting remains either relatively static (the trees and shrubs), or it's altered artificially on a given date – the change between defined 'summer' and 'winter' bedding. Seasonality is usually achieved by intensive annual bedding arrangements, supposedly to satisfy public expectation.

Where local authorities are responsible for planting, the bedding displays presumably soak up the majority of the budget – but think how many hardy perennials and grasses could have been purchased, planted and maintained over the years for the same cost! The overall effect could be built up year after year and, as any gardener knows, just a few seasons to allow for maturity will produce a credible result. So why do we expect our councils to do just the opposite, and labour away at high-density bedding displays? Why not start to see our public spaces as a giant garden, to appreciate and mature over a period of time, and train horticulturalists accordingly?

The scenery in business ownership is usually much more static: predominantly a sea of evergreen shrubs, clipped randomly into 'blobs' of varying size.

A subtly changing scene, moving with the seasons, could be achieved so easily with carefully selected planting. We need to overcome our fear of untidiness; and learn to maintain a different palette of planting. If hardy perennials are mixed with ornamental grasses and bulbs, the overall effect is one of diversity and movement, and continual change throughout the year.

To explore the difference that a slightly more imaginative planting mix can bring, I've chosen to look in detail at the garden of a doctor's surgery in Leicestershire.



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Fig. 2 The instantly forgettable original gardens with failing planting and poor-quality mulch.

This is one of several gardens I maintain, and it shows how our public spaces can be dramatically improved by the addition of hardy perennials and grasses.

The Hugglescote Surgery, a new purpose-built facility, opened in February 2009. I took over maintenance of the garden in February 2010 and immediately photographed the grounds for reference and future comparison. During its first year, contractors had carried out basic maintenance; my brief was to plan and implement the maintenance and improvement of the garden on a long term basis.

The photographs illustrate the alteration from bland and infinitely forgettable to varied and interesting. My aim was to supplement the obvious with the unusual, creating a contrasting mix of planting which would hold a person’s interest, if only for a few seconds. This is essentially the difference between the forgettable, and the noticed.

The entire grounds have been treated in the same manner, but the pictures show two areas where the change has been most noticeable: a border adjacent to the front entrance and a garden viewed from the waiting room and consulting rooms.

In February 2010 the garden and entrance border consisted of a seemingly random scattering of rather forlorn-looking shrubs sitting in poor soil mixed with builders’ rubble. A thin layer of poor-quality mulch, made up partly of waste wood rather than tree chippings, was of no value. I do use bark mulch sourced from local tree surgeons in my gardens, but it needs to be about three inches deep to prevent weed germination, and regularly topped up – especially following prolonged wet seasons which rot the

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Fig. 3 Hardy perennials with roses and grasses add colour, movement and seasonality.

chip away quickly. The garden has since been re-mulched with much smaller chipped wood which packs down to form a dense carpet; the sloping border hasn't been treated with mulch as it tends to migrate on to the footpath. Instead, the border planting has been densely packed to create a 'living mulch'.

Throughout the grounds the shrubs appeared to be in no fixed plan or order – they'd been randomly planted with little thought to suitability. Shade lovers were planted in full sun, and vice versa. Suckering shrubs were at the lawn edge, and hedging plants such as hawthorn placed in the middle of a bed. Overall, the entire planting was seriously confused.

The need to fill an empty space as quickly and painlessly as possible usually results in plant groupings which are essentially unsustainable – too densely packed for the plants' predictable growth, or too thinly spaced to prevent weeds, and the wrong plants in the wrong places.

Unless an industry standard is adopted, or training improves, this will continue in our public space. And as planting remains in place for years, a few days' work (good or bad) becomes a legacy. The initial planting also has a massive impact upon its sustainability – how quickly will the area become overgrown and congested, and how easy will pruning and maintenance be? Unless maintenance is planned at conception, the likelihood of continuing quality diminishes with time.

It could be argued that the initial cost of planting a predominantly hardy



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Fig. 4 July 2012. Contrasting form and colour provide interest; shrubs are softened by grasses.

perennial/grasses border is greater than that of a mixed shrub border, or a mass planting of evergreens. However, the shrub border takes longer to mature, and may therefore require denser planting initially, followed by thinning in subsequent years, which is wasteful. Alternatively, supplementary underplanting may be required, which will eventually be shaded out.

This is why our public spaces often end up mass planted with tightly packed evergreens – quick, simple and seemingly cost effective. However, in my experience the mass planting leads almost immediately to natural thinning, as weaker plants die owing to competition for light, water and nutrients. A secondary problem of inter-mixed weeds then presents an on-going maintenance problem. Eventually, the evergreens grow together and the obligatory pruning into a ‘blob’ or square inevitably follows. Such a pruning regime frequently results in dieback, bare stems and unsightly cuts made by hedgecutters and chainsaws.

In the medium to long term, the hardy perennial/grasses border or mixed perennial/grasses/shrub border wins, in aesthetics, low maintenance requirements and longevity. Hardy perennials and grasses are more forgiving of close planting, and become self-sustaining, producing a surplus of divisions. These can be planted in other parts of the garden, or swapped with other similar gardens, increasing bio-diversity and plant stock.

One year after the Hugglescote surgery opened, large gaps were already apparent in the planting scheme, the result of poor planting technique, lack of soil preparation, inappropriate plant siting, and inaccurate use of herbicide for weed control, leading to spray-drift contamination.

I retained as much of the original planting as possible, recognising the costs already incurred and avoiding unnecessary wastage; also the grounds benefited overall from the growth of the existing plants. Some plants were moved into more appropriate situations; some swapped with other gardens (shrubs exchanged for perennials), and wholly inappropriate plants (such as suckering shrubs) removed completely.

Ornamental grasses were put in the gaps to give height, movement and quick results – most grasses will bulk up and flower within a year or two. The grasses I used were *Calamagrostis* × *acutiflora*, *Carex flagellifera*, *Carex muskingumensis*, *Panicum virgatum*, *Deschampsia cespitosa*, *Stipa tenuissima*, *Stipa calamagrostis*, *Stipa gigantea* and *Festuca glauca*.

Hardy perennials have been added in groups – *Sedum spectabile*, *Crocsmia* (smaller varieties), *Sedum spurium*, *Osteospermum jucundum*, *Ajuga reptans* and *Tiarella cordifolia*.

Other hardy perennials were put in as individual plants, although several individuals may have been scattered throughout the grounds – *Heuchera*, *Brunnera macrophylla*, *Vinca minor*, *Astilbe*, *Calamintha grandiflora*, *Verbena bonariensis* and *Veronica peduncularis*.

I've also used lavender and thyme (creeping varieties) which are technically sub-shrubs.

Large monoculture blocks of shrubs remained dominant in some areas. Some have been screened using *Deschampsia cespitosa* – the light, hazy effect combines well with the structure of the shrubs and lawn. By bringing the lawn forward slightly, enough space was created for the grasses. Overall the impact of the mass shrub plantings has been reduced by the addition of hardy perennials and grasses, even if they're not always directly next to the shrubs.

Finally, each year more *Narcissus* bulbs are added. Their leaves are obscured by the fresh new growth of the grasses and *Crocsmia*, bringing year-round interest at a time when the herbaceous perennials and deciduous grasses are cut back. I'm not afraid to leave the entrance border cut back to the ground and bare during January – the bulbs soon show, and the annual cutting back is in itself a reminder of the changing seasons. Expecting a garden to perform every month of the year is unrealistic: if dormancy is noticed, then so too is the subsequent welcome new growth.

I always cut back the herbaceous perennials/grasses before the tips of the bulbs break through, to avoid damaging them. This could easily become standard practice for grounds maintenance of our public spaces – it's quick, easy and effective. This type of maintenance regime is certainly more straightforward and cost effective than multiple visits to trim the same hedges throughout the growing season. Where mass plantings of evergreens mature over time, the end result is often the equivalent of an informal hedge – repeated pruning at a convenient height for the contractor.

At some of the gardens I look after, I've cut hedges as often as fortnightly or monthly during a warm, wet summer; this is not a viable solution for most public spaces. But the hardy perennial and grasses border sails through the growing season with little or no attention – perhaps a few weeds pulled, or some divisions to begin with, and that's it until the annual cut-back in late December/early January. Admittedly, more horticultural knowledge is required to maintain a grasses and hardy perennial planting: knowing when to divide plants, keeping a stock of suitable replacements for short-lived



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Fig. 5 The border near the main entrance draws attention.



Fig. 6 A diverse but low maintenance border.

benefits become obvious. As members of the public visit the site, they comment favourably on the improvements. At Hugglescote, a bench appeared in the garden, followed by a bird table – not my work, but members of staff. Some have asked for divisions of plants – interest in horticulture is encouraged, and plant diversity grows. If a public space is simply left, none of this happens.

What is it that makes a public space worthwhile? Is it points of interest, a difference to the routine and the norm, or simply a new perspective, like a walk in the park away from the office desk? Our daily views are part of us, shaping our thoughts, our impressions and directly affecting our quality of life. Perhaps this explains why we put so much time and effort into our own individual gardens – it's what we see every day of our lives. 🌱

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