

# The prairie out back

Adrian de Baat had a perfectly nice, normal garden – until he discovered a whole new style of planting inspired by wild landscapes. Now his garden is full of dreamy, naturalistic combinations of elegant perennials and grasses

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## In brief

**WHAT** Long, narrow rear garden to family home built in 1928.

**WHERE** Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire.

**SIZE** A third of an acre.

**SOIL** Neutral to acid; gravelly by the house.

**CONDITIONS** Sheltered by surrounding mature trees; rear garden faces northwest.

**SPECIAL FEATURES** Borders influenced by Dutch planting designer Piet Oudolf; exotic garden inspired by travel.

View along grass path to house, tall airy flower heads of the golden oat grass (*Stipa gigantea*), brilliant red sparks of *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer', Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*), fluffy purple *Astilbe chinensis* var. *taquetii* 'Purpurlanze'.

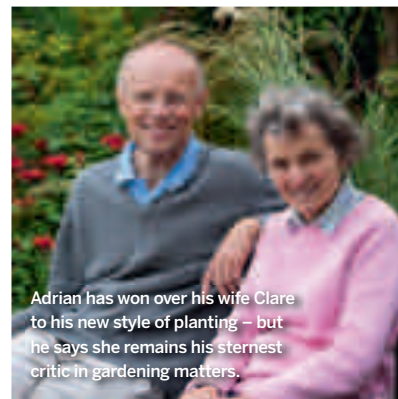


Clare and Adrian's bright, open garden has a large lawn fringed with long borders packed with grasses and perennials.

The light of the converted shines in Adrian de Baat's eyes as he reminisces on his Damascene conversion to a new kind of gardening. "The defining moment was a sunny September morning in 19XX," he says. "I had been to a rather uninspiring garden centre and, on a whim, followed a sign to a small nursery. I wandered in, to be confronted by waving stipas and the twisted red flowers of *Miscanthus* and realised that this was exactly what I wanted."

Adrian and his wife Clare first began gardening nearly 35 years ago when they moved into a handsome house in Welwyn Garden City. The garden was of a decent size but rather overgrown and neglected: "There were a lot of oil barrels and old tyres among the few plants." Like most people they had no interest in gardens until they actually had one of their own so, having cleared away the detritus they did what everybody does: they started buying the odd plant that caught their eye in the local garden centre. This was the first incarnation of the garden: a big lawn with narrow borders and a vegetable patch and fruit cage at the far end. A classic design, functional but not exciting. As the years passed and their children grew, the garden evolved jerkily and without any particular style.

The path to Adrian's moment of clarity in the nursery followed his early retirement and a growing interest in developing the garden. With increased leisure they began visiting more gardens and the more they saw the more determined Adrian became to change the garden. "I realised that, in our unknowing enthusiasm, we had made a few mistakes



Adrian has won over his wife Clare to his new style of planting – but he says she remains his sternest critic in gardening matters.

and we needed to develop some sort of style to the garden. I also knew that I could make something quite special here."

All this questing eventually led to that nursery, Bell Bar near Hatfield in Hertfordshire (which has since closed). Its owner, Simon Wener, introduced Adrian to the work of Piet Oudolf, the Dutchman most famous for pioneering the New Perennial movement. "Simon showed me Piet's book, and from then on I was sold." Adrian would go off plant-shopping and come back with armfuls of perennials and grasses. "Clare would take one look and groan: 'Not another grass!'" Slowly the garden evolved into its more sophisticated and considerably more beautiful current state.

#### An original interpretation

The garden may be inspired by Oudolf, but as Adrian says, "I think that we have gone beyond a slavish impersonation and have developed our own twist on things." Clare's position in the garden is as outside critic, "weeder of the small pink things" and defender of the lawn ("Adrian wanted to make it much smaller but I like the lawn and wanted to keep it quite big.") It was her insight that led to the removal of the large golden *leylandii* "planted in a fit of enthusiasm many years ago", which then gave space for the first part of the new garden.

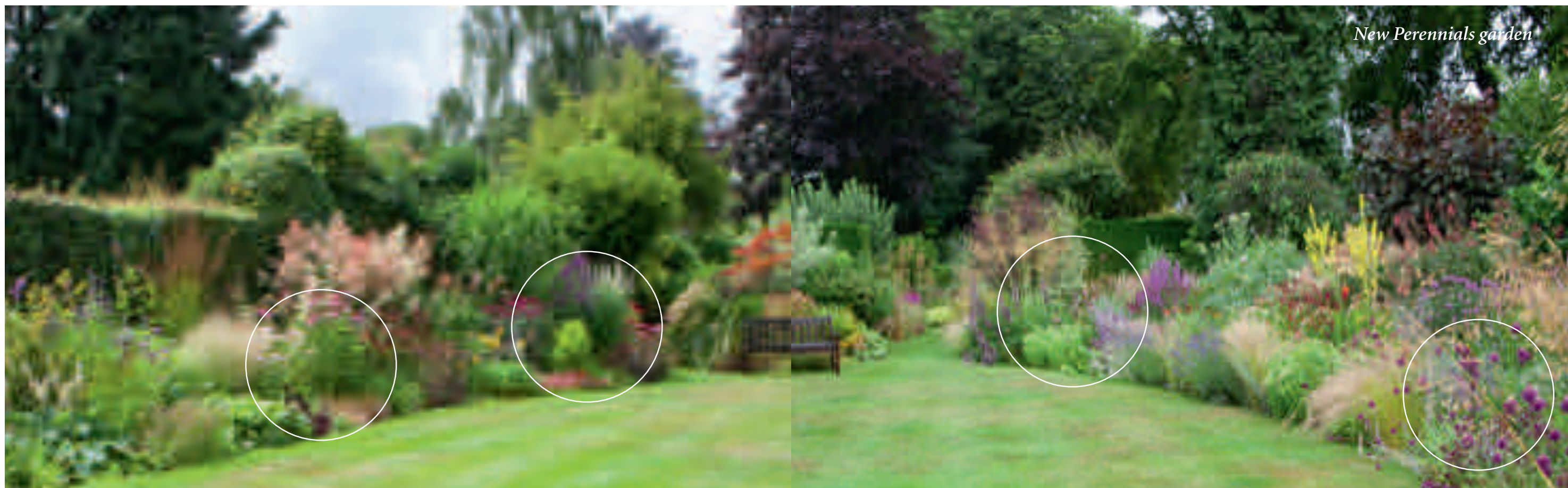
The space is long and thin, waisted like a bottle and roughly divided by a well-trimmed hedge. At the end is a charming exotic garden. Cleverly, there is also room for a well-concealed greenhouse, compost heap and all that necessary but unsightly stuff. The ▶



New Perennials garden

“ I think that we have gone beyond a slavish impersonation and have developed our own twist on things ”

Tall flower stems of purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and its pink cultivar 'Blush' mingle with the shaggy, purple-red flowers of the bee balm *Monarda* 'Gewitterwolke'.



## Planting ideas

### 1 Romantic meadow

Elegant grasses lend this perennial planting a relaxed atmosphere. From left: pale pink flowers of the bee balm *Monarda* 'Fishes' are set against a haze of the grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau'; and magenta coneflowers – the classic North American prairie plant *Echinacea purpurea* – mingle with oatmeal-coloured plumes of the rough feather grass (*Stipa calamagrostis*). Beneath are the deep red daylilies of *Hemerocallis* 'American Revolution', and on the right, similarly shaped tapering flower heads in crimson (*Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Atrosanguinea') and purple (*Agastache rugosa* 'Liquorice Blue').

### 2 Perennial contrasts

In the centre, Adrian pairs two plants of similar form and size but contrasting flower colour – purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) alongside white blooms of willow-leaved loosestrife (*Lysimachia ephemerum*). In front of them, the bright green foliage of North America wild oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) is flanked by duskier colours: on the left, dark purple emerging flowers of *Angelica gigas* with the bronze-green foliage and ruby-red blooms of *Monarda* 'Raspberry Wine'; on the right, the bronze-purple leaves of *Sedum* 'Matrona' make a superb edging plant.

### 3 Tall edging

Rather than stick to borders that rise uniformly from front to back, Adrian uses tall, architectural plants at key points in the front of his borders, such as the end of the northern border. The forward position means that the stately, 1.5m-tall flower spikes and dramatic foliage of spiny bear's breeches (*Acanthus spinosus*) can be admired close up. The metallic purple hoods of the white flowers combine well with the planting beyond, including purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and pale blue *Salvia sclarea* (far right).

### 4 Spotlight plants

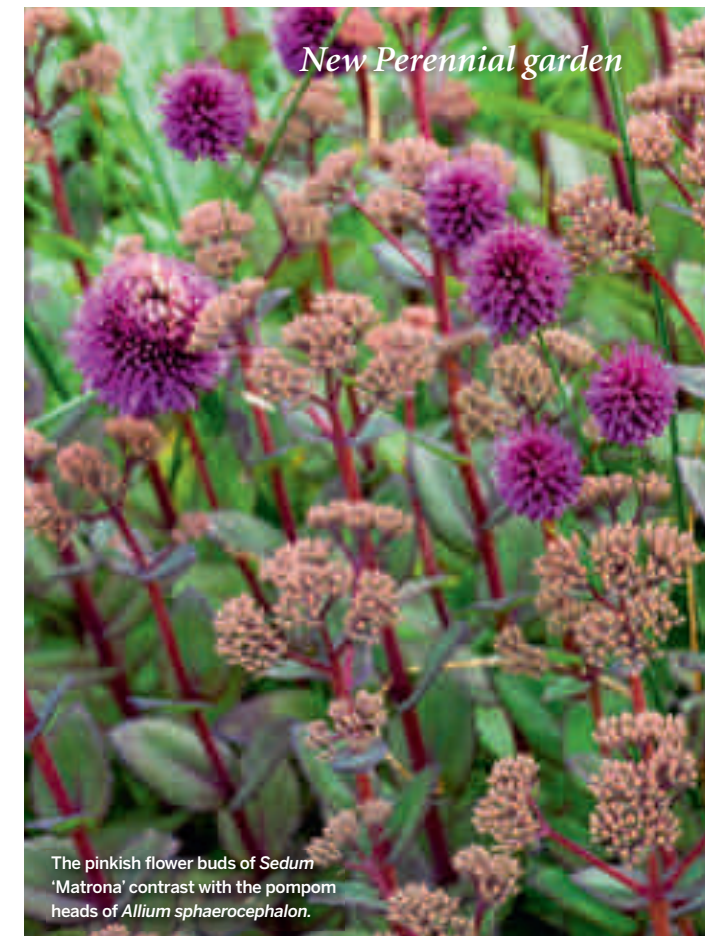
The back of the house is in shade for much of the morning, making it an ideal backdrop for tall airy plants that catch the sun. Here another tall edging plant, the golden oat grass *Stipa gigantea*, marks the end of the border with a cloud of sunlit inflorescences. Set just behind it, the white flower stems of the Spanish dagger (*Yucca gloriosa*, named for its spiky leaves) rise to a height of up to 2.1m, and shine out against the light shadows behind. Similar effects can be achieved against dark yew hedges.



Beyond the lawn and main borders lies this small sheltered area, laid out around a hummock of golden *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' and fringed with the scarlet speckles of *Potentilla thurberi* 'Monarch's Velvet' and deep purple-pink *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen'.



*Echinacea* 'White Swan' flowers from June to August among the soft foliage of the feather grass, *Stipa tenuissima*.

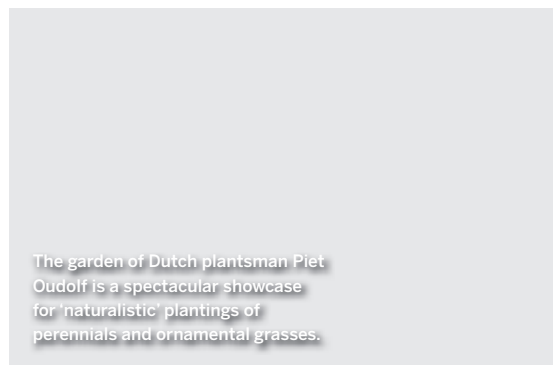


The pinkish flower buds of *Sedum* 'Matrona' contrast with the pompom heads of *Allium sphaerocephalon*.

▷ exotic garden is where the other great influence on the de Baat's planting style can be seen: travel. The paths wind around towering bananas, South African restios ("Kirstenbosch botanic garden in Cape Town was the most inspirational place I have ever visited," says Adrian), and even a bed of cacti. "We used busy lizzies as some of the underplanting as we had seen some growing in the wild in the cloud forest of Costa Rica and it seemed the perfect solution," says Clare. The larger part of the garden is given over to Adrian's Oudolfian fantasy. "The tension between formal and informal fascinates me," he says. Strict boundary hedges to either side enclose a frothing horde of delicious grasses and late-summer perennials. "I like sturdy perennials with wildflower characteristics" which is, of course, the essence of this style of planting: to make things look untamed but retaining the colour and form of a domestic garden. Glorious monardas, drifts of echinaceas (many grown from his own seed) and throbbing persicarias cavort among *Stipa calamagrostis* and *S. tenuissima*. Looking on with a tolerant amusement are a venerable azalea and the few shrubs that survive from the garden's early days in the 1970s. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS 35 Dingswell Road, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire AL8 7PB. TEL 01707 324074. EMAIL adrian.debaat@ntlworld.com WEBSITE www.ngs.org.uk OPEN under the National Gardens Scheme on 31 July (2pm-5.30pm) and 23 October (2pm-5pm). Admission £3.50. Also open by appointment, June to October (admission £5, including tea and cake).



The garden of Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf is a spectacular showcase for 'naturalistic' plantings of perennials and ornamental grasses.

#### The New Perennials movement

This naturalistic planting style has grown in influence over the last 20 years. New Perennial gardens typically feature elegant **grasses** and a palette of wild-looking herbaceous **perennials** including *Echinacea*, *Eryngium*, *Persicaria*, *Veronicastrum*, *Rudbeckia* and *Aster*, often planted in drifts. Many of these plants grow wild in **meadow** and **prairie** habitats; planting them together in gardens mimics natural plant 'communities'. New Perennial plants are often long-flowering and easy to maintain; many bloom in late summer. Spent plants are valued for their **seedheads**, which are left in place through the winter. Naturalistic planting can be traced back to the work of Irish garden writer William Robinson (1838-1935) and German nurseryman Karl Foerster (1874-1970). The prairie-style plantings by Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden in the USA from the late 1970s were also influential. Since the mid-1990s the leading figure in this style of planting is **Piet Oudolf**, one of the so-called Dutch Wave of planting designers (see issue 166). Oudolf projects include Scampston Hall in Yorkshire. [Oudolf's latest book is reviewed on page XX.]

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*Persicaria polymorpha* now split into several species... *P. x fennica* is the new name for this form.

Vivid red *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Atrosanguinea' blooms between floppy plumes of *Stipa calamagrostis* and creamy *Persicaria x fennica*.



The aromatic foliage and pink flowers of *Monarda* 'Fishes' float above a cloud of tussock grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau').