

Fields of glory

Hailstone Barn, near Tetbury, Gloucestershire

Tiffany Daneff visits a naturalistic courtyard garden that cleverly sets up this converted barn in a sea of arable land

Photographs by Rebecca Bernstein





Preceding pages: The courtyard is planted with grasses and herbaceous perennials. Above: A path winds towards the house. Facing page: Lupins, penstemon, nepeta and others are selected to be low maintenance, with colours and shapes repeated throughout

SET in open wheat fields with no trees nearby to lend height and no other landmarks providing a focal point, the old farmyard at Hailstone Barn was always going to require careful handling. How could one make a garden full of colour and interest, that keeps going all through the growing season, yet sits easily in the landscape without standing out like a sore thumb?

A wildflower garden seemed the obvious solution, but, as anyone who has made one knows, this is infinitely easier to say than do. The first attempt started out well. The farmyard, trampled by dairy cattle for decades, had been dug over, with plenty of the naturally occurring Cotswold brash worked in to lower the fertility of the soil, but, even so, the wildflowers quickly succumbed to weeds.

Eventually, the owner resorted to asking an old school friend for lunch. James Alexander-Sinclair, now a garden designer, took one look and declared that the only way to achieve the desired effect was to scrap the wildflowers and start afresh, this time planting a mixture of herbaceous perennials and grasses. This would create that loose, natural-looking mix that bends in the wind and turns gold in late summer, like wheat. It would take a few seasons before the perennials bulked up and performed, but, as they settled, they would gradually push out most of the weeds.

Mr Alexander-Sinclair designed three paths to run through the planting, radiating out from a centre point, like the symbol for the Isle of Man. These would enable his client, who uses a wheelchair after an accident left him paralysed, to get right inside the planting. The accident is why the barn conversion has windows that slide back to give access onto the broad timber deck that wraps around the buildings, thus bringing the outdoors inside.

‘In high summer, one looks across a sea of plants brimming with colour and shapes’

Several years after planting, the garden has reached maturity. Simply getting the plants in was no easy task. To avoid disturbing the dormant weed seeds, the plot was left un-dug. Instead, each plant had to be dropped into its own hole, each one made by using a pick axe and a metal spike to break through the rubble. The effort paid off. In high summer, one looks across a sea of plants brimming with colour and a variety of shapes and forms that draw the eye from one part of the design to the other, settling at one moment

on the almost luminous artichoke globes, then drifting over to pick up the scattered reds of the scarlet daylilies (*Hemerocallis* Stafford), the deeper ruby of *Penstemon* Garnet and *Knautia macedonica* towards the fringe of *Persicaria amplexicaulis* Taurus.

The arrangement of the plants has rhythm and repetition, but handled in such a way that the plants appear to have chosen their own places—as, indeed, many have. Self-seeding is encouraged, although, at the same time, thuggish behaviour has to be contained, with the chief culprits (fennel and valerian) checked as necessary. It is, says the designer, a question of balance, of encouraging spread where it’s wanted and pulling up where it’s not.

Even after a battering from winds and heavy rain, the plants stand strong without support, because they’ve been raised to be tough, never staked and not much fed or watered. Luckily, thanks to the Cotswold brash, drainage is good and the plants are left to get on with things. Under a dark and heavy sky, the yellows and greens of the foliage seem even more intense.

In a few weeks, as the days draw in, the grasses—giant stipas and rustling *Molinia*—will flower. By autumn, their shapes will add to those of the developing seedheads, especially when backlit by the light of a low sun.

The key was in the plant selection, in particular in choosing plants that are tough, ➤





Decking wraps around the house, giving access to the plants. The Norman Planters are light, faux metal from Capital Garden Products

provide structure and produce interesting seedheads. Another important ingredient—given the lack of trees—is height. This is more than delivered by the globe artichoke, valerian and fennel, which, under wide open skies and given enough rain, can make 8ft–10ft. One rugged hawthorn is a survivor of a lost hedge.

‘Plants are raised to be tough, never staked and not much fed or watered’

Thalictrums and *Verbena bonariensis* provide a lacy infill at middle height and pinpricks of colour are provided throughout the scheme using, among others, *Cirsium rivulare* and several forms of *Sanguisorba*. The plant list is large and includes many repeating forms, producing a sense of harmony throughout. As the seasons pass, some plants have proved more adaptable than others and occasional substitutions are made.

Lower-storey plants are equally as important, particularly around the edges of paths, where comforting mounds of the reliable blue *Geranium Rozanne* contrast with the uprights (foxgloves, *Iris Rajah*, *Verbascum chaixii*

Repetition, repetition, repetition

To bring harmony to a planting, repeat colour, form and leaf shape.

One of the easiest ways of doing this is by choosing several varieties of the same species, a technique that designer James Alexander-Sinclair used here throughout. Here are a few examples to try

Asters *Aster* Little Carlow, *A. x frikartii* Mönch, *A. laevis*

Calliope, *A.* Coombe Fish-acre and *A. Horizontalis*

Euphorbias *Euphorbia cyparissias* Fens Ruby and *E. characias* Humpty Dumpty

Salvias *Salvia* Caradonna, *S. nemorosa* Amethyst, *S. x jamensis* Peter Vidgeon, *S. x jamensis* Royal Bumble and *S. pratensis* Indigo

Daylilies *Hemerocallis* Golden Chimes and *H. Stafford*

Penstemons *Penstemon* Firebird and *P. Garnet*

Catmints *Nepeta* Dawn to Dusk and *N. Walker's Low*

Foxgloves *Digitalis* *lutea* and *D. parviflora*

Bistorts *Sanguisorba officinalis* Arnhem, *S. Blackthorn*, *S. Canadensis* and *S. officinalis* Red Thunder

Thalictrums *Thalictrum* Elin and *T. Splendide White*

Album, salvias) and help to ground the planting. Clipped box also provides moments of solidity, as does the statue at the centre of the planting by Johannes von Stumm. Filling in the gaps at ground level is the ever-useful, softly branching *Euphorbia cyparissias*, which is ideal for gardens where there is space and one actively wants it to spread.

The seed heads are left to stand over winter or until the weather reduces them to mush, at which point they are cut down. Yet it is never long before signs of the new season emerge, when the bulbs push through with a selection

of orange, black and white tulips, followed by self-seeded oxlips and primroses.

For the owner, almost the best part of the garden is that the plants grow so tall that he becomes invisible, which, he says, doesn't often happen when you're permanently in a chair. For Mr Alexander-Sinclair, the experience was invaluable in a subsequent project, making Horatio's Garden for the Scottish National Spinal Injuries Unit at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow. Yet the real success is that this garden doesn't look as if it was made for someone in a wheelchair. 🦽