



Divine Interventions & the Planting Holy Grail

Head Gardener, **Andrea Brunsendorf** and Gardener, **Amanda Dennis** share insights into planting combinations from great gardens of the world.

Every year we incorporate new plants and plantings in the garden with the aim of delighting both garden visitors and the garden team alike.

You may ask where our ideas for this come from and so we thought we would share them with you.

The highlight of the gardening calendar is considered by many to be the Chelsea Flower Show. Its Show Gardens can provide inspiration and showcase the latest trends however, we find that the most fruitful opportunities for inspiration come from the interesting conversations with the influx of visitors from all over the world. This year we have received many transatlantic visitors, including the Director and Trustees of New York Botanic Gardens, students from Longwood Gardens and Chanticleer. Closer to home we have hosted Head Gardeners of Sissinghurst, Wakehurst Place and many private estates, the Director of the Royal Parks and a delegation from German Historic Parks and Gardens. International students based at Great Dixter, British trainees from Fulham Palace and Buckingham Palace and REEP scholars from Morocco have also visited.

Our journeys to Europe and garden visits in the UK also provide much horticultural stimulation. This was especially valuable this year whilst working on our new Hare Court development and when considering our aspirations to create a Peony meadow planting underneath the new Japanese Elm, which would then link with a refurbished Peony Garden with longer seasonal interest.

Here are our top six garden visits of the year so far:



Mien Ruys 'recipe' gardens to inspire the Dutch amateur gardener

Mien Ruys garden in Dedemsvaart, the Netherlands

Mien Ruys was a pioneer working in the 1980s. She created easy maintenance plant combinations with a long season of interest and high aesthetic value that everyone could do at home in the back gardens of Holland. Her 'recipes' became very famous and are still innovative and relevant today.

"However, as with anything in life, there are always exceptions and we are guilty of staking our Dahlias every year. They are the 'Primadonnas' of our borders but their colourful impact outweighs the extra time involved in nurturing them."



Head Gardener studying a new planting at Hummelo, Piet Oudlof's Garden in the Netherlands

Hummelo, Piet Oudlof's garden at his home in the Netherlands

No introduction is required for this world renowned plantsman. Piet's 'back garden' initially served as a nursery to propagate the plants, otherwise unavailable commercially, which he wanted to use in his planting designs. Run successfully by his wife Anya, the nursery was a mecca for gardeners looking for unusual perennials. As the use of perennials became more popular, the plants became more readily available from mainstream wholesalers and the nursery was no longer required. The space became a site for experimenting with plants within a garden setting, trialling combinations to incorporate into new landscape and planting designs across Europe and the USA.

Hermannshof, a public garden near Heidelberg, Germany

This garden embraces a naturalistic style, growing plants which originate from plant societies similar in nature, requiring similar conditions but arranging them in an aesthetically pleasing way. It has a surprisingly similar micro-climate to the UK, sitting on the slopes of a hillside in a wine growing area. Riesling is produced there – another good reason for a visit!

Jardin Plume, a private garden near Rouen, France

Over ten years, previous nursery-owners and husband and wife team converted a flat apple orchard into one of Europe's leading herbaceous perennial gardens. Admired for the atmosphere they have created, the garden has a strong sense of place. The combination of structures and textures gives both softness and strong lines and the garden is a result of their collaborative artistic partnership.



A seasonal highlight at Sissinghurst – the White Garden in the Summer

Sissinghurst in Kent

Sissinghurst is distinct from the above mentioned gardens as it turns the idea of long seasons of interest on its head. There are many seasonal highlights, unmissable and bold, each in their own distinct season. The White Garden is really worth visiting in the summer and, when you do, it is astounding. Nothing is done by halves here. There is an implicit understanding that the garden rooms have different seasons, creating a changing experience every time you visit.

Great Dixter in Sussex

Combining bold seasonal highlights like Sissinghurst, Great Dixter also incorporates naturalistic styles and experiments with new ideas. This is a garden which does not stand still and despite the death in 2010 of Christopher Lloyd (who created the garden) it is still relevant to the time. The ornamental meadows have started creeping into the borders, softening them more than in Christopher Lloyd's day where a more blocky approach could be seen. This chimes well with our general appreciation of naturalistic plantings, and feels somewhat like the Sussex countryside is creeping in; an approach we have embraced here, bringing some of the country into the city with our long grass areas and planting around the steps down onto the lawn, lending a romantic backdrop to our Rose Border.

Our transatlantic visitors and fellows reminded us of our love for American gardens, in particular Chanticleer and Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania. Chanticleer has a mission to employ *the* top horticulturalist but many also have additional artistic talents, which allow them to make a unique contribution to the tapestry of the garden. Longwood Gardens is the epitome of ornamental horticulture where the sky is the limit and unimaginable displays are produced in succession throughout the year. They rely on very specialist growers, committed to growing things which cannot be found or easily replicated without them, such as the 1,000 bloom chrysanthemum created by specialist Japanese gardeners.

It is all too easy to be inspired by these great gardens but success will lie in the implementation and ongoing maintenance which can be an entirely different story! We are no longer in the Victorian times when it was usual to have an army of gardeners carefully tending every square metre, but must work on the principal of one gardener per acre. Our ambitions often far outweigh this, and we look to these great gardens for setting our horticultural standards and ornamental aspirations. Drawing from the best approaches and innovations of these gardens, we create our own version, our Inner Temple Garden identity that fits within our specific setting, micro-climate, soil and environmental conditions.

Therefore our available resources dictate that our combinations must walk the fine line and balance available time with maximum aesthetic impact. There are some key principles we stick to, plants must have a long season of interest (not just with their flower but foliage too); generally be able to support themselves; fit our growing conditions; be resistant to disease and; cope with the inevitable competition of a herbaceous border. However, as with anything in life, there are always exceptions and we are guilty of staking our Dahlias every year. They are the 'Primadonnas' of our borders but their colourful

impact outweighs the extra time involved in nurturing them.

There have been some famous examples of plants which fulfil our key principles and create maximum impact. Piet Oudolf's wavy hedges create exciting structure and a backdrop to herbaceous borders. They do not require tight precision trimming twice a year and, unlike its strictly rectangular, razor sharp British counterpart, its form is more forgiving in its fluffy state, as can be seen along our War of the Roses border. A Mien Ruys planting combination, a star performer in semi-shade, is made of various small and tall bistorts, astilbes, hydrangeas, native goats' beards, and ornamental grasses and ferns. The flowering times of each plant follow one another and the structure repeats with various forms of pinnate flowers all in shades of white, bringing light to darker areas. Some of these you may spot in the garden here! You know when you have a winning combination because you start seeing it in other gardens, and inevitably (as is the struggle of the pioneer) you need to find something new.

Our best and most successful plant recipes include the lawn edge of the Woodland Garden where we combine woodland asters, hydrangea, grasses, sedges, hostas and bistorts, creating a cohesive bower edge. This supports the central planting and creates texture and interest without relying solely on flowers, and you can safely push the mower past it without getting caught. If you are faced with full sun we would recommend *Pennisetum* 'Bunny Tails' and *Pennisetum* 'Tall Tails' combined with *Verbena bonariensis*. Admittedly verbena is a bit old hat, but this combination cannot be beaten for length of flowering, height and airy transparency, creating a summery scene even on a cloudy day. Our 'new hat' and the discovery of this summer is the combination of *Heliopsis* 'Summer Nights' and *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster', both starting to flower in mid-June, epitomising the golden yellow of summer turning into autumn. In the High Border they form a beautiful complement to blousy Phlox and Dahlia. *Heliopsis* also works solo weaved through the border and verging to the front, starting to replace our old time favourite *Kiss me over the Gate*.

These can seem to the average garden visitors as though they have appeared by divine intervention but they are the result of many years of experimentation, observations, late night heated horticultural discussions and professional exchanges of knowledge, open mindedness to something which may initially seem whacky, lectures, seminars, and an endless interest in other gardens all over the world.

As a professional, when armed with a catalogue of your own recipes which can be applied in different situations, you feel that you are reaching the planting Holy Grail. The prospect of finally reaching it is an elusive idea which we strive to reach throughout our careers with every planting. In the meantime, we hope that our visitors enjoy the tangible development of this never-ending quest. Next time you visit a garden (perhaps one mentioned above) look out for one combination which you can bring home to try; you might just find your own Holy Grail!

Andrea Brunsendorf and Amanda Dennis



Left to right – Pamela Gent, Andrea Brunsendorf, Emily Blackmore, Amanda Dennis