



Border Design 101

An expert shares his list of simple concepts for making complex gardens. Joe Eck

WHATEVER OTHER FEATURES a garden may possess, a perennial border is usually at its heart. One would think, then, that the perennial border would be the most carefully designed of all a garden's features, contrived not only to supply the maximum amount of bloom throughout the growing season, but also to reflect the most subtle and careful planning. Though an exuberant, romantic tumble of flower is the aim of most gardeners, subtle underlying principles of order must also exist, else the border may slip easily from romantic exuberance into what might frankly be called a mess.

We may best begin by defining what is meant by the words "perennial border." To start with, it is not a flower bed, for that is apt to be a depressingly narrow strip of plants along a house wall, or worse, one floating without anchor somewhere out there in the lawn.

A proper perennial border should have visual richness at all times, with flowers to admire and flowers to cut, from spring to fall, and perhaps even with berries, seed heads, and branches for forcing, from winter to spring.

The most successful perennial borders contain far more diversity than may be offered by herbaceous perennials alone. An enormous gain is made if one thinks also of including small trees, tall and short woody shrubs, flowering vines, evergreens, bulbs, and annuals. True gardeners will delight in enlarging the sorts of plants they can grow, but this wider range also makes possible several other goals. First, the season of flower (or of berry, twig, and seed head) is extended; second, a more varied composition of form and texture becomes possible; and third, one can garden vertically, in the air, as it were, by lifting the interest of the

One cannot make a satisfactory garden picture without some big foliage of a rounded nature like that of bergenias, Japanese anemones, and hostas, contrasted with the erect lines of irises and grasses. Further if these more conspicuous leaves are kept in the foreground of a view, and the small-leaved shrubs and plants at the end, it will help to make the garden appear larger.

—Graham Stuart Thomas, *Perennial Garden Plants*

The smaller the garden the more important is the relationship between the scale of the plant and the size of the bed or border, and also the size of each clump. Small gardens tend to be fussily planted, for we gardeners are apt to try to grow as many different plants as possible. This disquieting impression can be minimized by the use of larger patches of dwarf groundcover plants in frontal positions. And do not cut out groundcover plants on the score that they only provide leaves; there are many that can play their part nobly in the provision of seasonal flowers.

—Graham Stuart Thomas, *Perennial Garden Plants*

border up from the tallest perennials, which are at best no more than six or so feet tall, to layers that may extend to 15 feet, or even 20. When it includes this diversity, a perennial border is no longer strictly what that term implies. Rather, we have a **mixed border**, in which garden plants of many categories are blended together, de-ghettoized, one might say.

The Need for Depth in a Border

Incorporating this diversity into our borders has a clear first consequence: The border must be larger—really quite a bit larger—than the traditional flower bed of five or so feet. Gardeners may be daunted by the concept of a border 20 feet in depth, or even more. But to achieve continuous interest from earliest spring through the last, mellow days of November may require one that may be far longer than one might have thought possible. For a border must be ample enough to accommodate not only the shortest to the tallest perennials and annuals, but also, perhaps, boxwoods, trimmed yews, berberis, shrub roses, lilacs, cherries, crab apples, dogwoods, and the like. My rule of thumb calls for a border whose length is at least five times its depth, longer if possible. I know that many gardeners tremble at the thought of such vast spaces to weed. But, really, the spread of small trees and large bushes shades out many undesirable plants, and the use of generous drifts of reliably sturdy perennials gives them little place. Anyway, to quote the great Irish poet W. B. Yeats, “Although they do not talk of it at school . . . we must labor to be beautiful.” Which is to say, you are in it, or you’re not.

Choosing a Framework

A central convention of border design is the use of a hedge, wall, or fence at the back, against which plants are arranged. As with most conventions, if one can look beneath its mere automatic ubiquity, it contains

wisdom. The very richness of a mixed flower border—its plants, their complexity of growth or of leaf, twig, and flower—requires an organizing screen against which to display itself. The appreciating eye, bound to play excitedly in and among various colors, textures, and shapes, has to have a place to stop, a rest, a statement that what is to be enjoyed lies just here, in front, and not all about the place. Both drama and painting provide useful metaphors to this controlled visual activity, for the backdrop to a border is much like the frame of a painting or the proscenium arch within which a play occurs. Both can be dispensed with, and they have been, in painting as in the performing arts. But they are dispensed with at some risk, and with some reason, after due consideration by the artist or dramatist. Otherwise, they are wisely taken simply as a given, as is the necessity to back a flower border with some firm line—hedge, fence, or wall—that separates it from the surrounding landscape.

Assuming that we may pass over the iris nut, or the daylily fanatic, both of whom are wonderfully able to



ignore the rest of the plant world in favor of one genus, most gardeners want lots of plants and will be as impatient of spatial limitations as decent growing practices will allow. So the flower border is apt to contain—should contain—a welter of plants, positively packed in. But after the length and depth of the border have been (I hope generously) determined, and a firm backdrop has been placed behind it, the crucial question then emerges: “How can all these plants be harmoniously arranged?”

Principles of Plant Placement

There is no absolute answer, but I have found it useful to think of the flower border as a series of panels, one flowing harmoniously into the next, though all but the most sophisticated viewers (and the gardener) should not be aware of the divisions but, rather, of the unified beauty of the whole. For with all art, a certain slyness is required. So, for example, though each panel might juxtapose a tall, grassy plant with a spreading, broad-leafed one, they need not be the same grassy and broad-leafed plants. One panel might show a Siberian iris close to a pulmonaria, and the next, a calamagrostis near to a very broad-leafed hardy geranium, such as *G. magnificum*. The point, of course, is not which plants to include but, rather, to think in a way that will see each segment of the border as at once alike and different.

Essential Plants for Structure

In every climate and garden, however, there are some

plants that must be considered almost obligatory, not just as necessary components of the border, but also as essential structural elements, repeated frequently, not with mathematical regularity but with an underlying sense of predictability, and so of order. For much of the United States, Siberian iris and peonies are the best examples of such plants. Most gardeners will grow them for their sumptuous early summer flowers, especially as they come in enormous variety, offering something that is at once the same and different, and thus satisfying one great compulsion of gardeners—collecting. But in planning the structure of a perennial border, it is their pattern of growth that is most valuable, for one is grassy and the other is broad-leafed, and both will remain in excellent shape for the whole summer. In most years, they even display attractive autumn foliage, the Siberian iris turning to butter yellow and the peony to shades of apple and maple-leaf red. Both are strong plants, but softer ones may also be included in the rhythm of the flower border, such as hardy geraniums, platycodons, nepetas, and dianthus. Even annuals, many of which are best sprinkled here and there, might contribute to a subtle order, as with patches of the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, for June flower, or the beautiful pale lilac-blue petunia ‘Azure Pearls,’ for bloom from early summer to frost.

Achieving Four-Season Interest

Once a satisfying structural rhythm is created in a flower border, we must then be sure that plantings are arranged to provide maximum interest from as early in spring as possible until the heavy snows of early winter, and even beyond. Spring-blooming bulbs like scillas and chionodoxas are good for blue, and crocus for many colors; and likewise, snowdrops should always be planted beneath the Asian witch hazels, which will bloom in hazy yellow or orange while the snowdrops are still turning the bare earth silver beneath. The earliest tulips will accompany flowering crab apples, and the latest will be in bloom with the lilacs and early perennials. From June to frost there should be a riot of color from perennial plants, though it will come in peaks, beginning with the border geraniums, hardy salvias, early thalictrums, erigerons, and the like, all punctuated by Siberian iris and peonies. High summer will be a bounty of yellow daisies and border phlox, possibly with many daylilies, though





A MIXED BORDER FOR YEAR-ROUND INTEREST

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1. <i>Syringa xprestoniae</i> 'Nocturn' | dianthus—pink and white | 23. <i>Aster novae-angliae</i> —soft shades, tall cultivars—but in variety |
| 1A. <i>Syringa xprestoniae</i> 'Agnes Smith' | 11. Dwarf bearded iris—only shades of blue | 24. <i>Aster novi-belgii</i> —medium height, in variety |
| 2. <i>Syringa vulgaris</i> cultivars | 12. <i>Stachys byzantina</i> | 25. <i>Eupatorium fistulosum</i> 'Gateway' |
| 3. <i>Malus sargentii</i> —multi-trunked | 13. <i>Stachys macrantha</i> | 26. <i>Phlox paniculata</i> —in variety, but soft shades |
| 4. Large boxwood—loosely mounded—4-5 ft. | 14. Border geraniums—pink and blue | 27. <i>Monarda</i> —soft shades |
| 5. Antique & shrub roses—tall, 5-6 ft. | 15. <i>Sedum 'Autumn Joy'</i> | 28. <i>Hemerocallis</i> in variety—but earliest spring blooming |
| 6. Antique & shrub roses—medium, 3-4 ft. | 16. <i>Sedum telephium</i> subsp. <i>maximum</i> 'Atropurpureum' | 29. <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> 'Gracillimus' |
| 7. Siberian iris—many cultivars | 17. <i>Sedum 'Vera Jameson'</i> | 30. <i>M. s.</i> 'Silberfeder' |
| 8. Herbaceous peonies—many cultivars—all medium | 18. <i>Astilbe chinensis</i> 'Pumila' | 31. <i>M. s.</i> var. <i>purpurascens</i> |
| 9. <i>Echinops sphaerocephalus</i> | 19. Mat-forming asters—Prof. Kippenburg type | 32. <i>Mackeya macrocarpa</i> 'Kelway's Coral Plume' |
| 9A. <i>Echinops bannaticus</i> 'Blue Globe' and 'Taplow Blue' (half and half) | 20. <i>Aster</i> 'Little Carlow' | 33. <i>Rodgersia pinnata</i> 'Superba' |
| 10. Reliably perennial cultivars of | 21. <i>Aster cordifolius</i> 'Silver Spray' | 34. Bedding plants |
| | 22. <i>Aster amellus</i> 'Violet Queen' | |

they should be planted close to the front of the border so that the tedious job of picking off yesterday's spent blooms can be done easily. Autumn should bring joe-pye weed, hardy chrysanthemums, and the beautiful native asters, both generally cultivated and wild-collected. In very late autumn there should be sprinklings of autumn crocus, particularly the violet *Crocus sativus* and *C. speciosus*, along with whatever other ones might be hardy, and the clear pink goblets of plenty of colchicums are indispensable, especially as they are surprisingly shade tolerant and so can be tucked in partially shaded spots. True winter should at least show the scarlet stems of *Cornus alba* 'Siberica', red-berried sprays of the deciduous holly, *Ilex verticillata*, and, in the odd warm spell of January, the sweetly fragrant umbels of *Viburnum xbodnantense*. The Asian witch hazels will quickly follow, and the floral year, never quite over except in the very coldest places, will begin again.

Remember the Three D's

Good gardeners almost instinctively think of their borders in terms of three D's: **Depth**, **Density**, and **Diversity**. Depth is not merely the amount of footage from front to back. It is also the creation of a layered effect—never, to be sure, "short, medium, and tall," but rather a complex interplay of heights through which the eye wanders, as at the edge of a forest that meets a field. Density is a satisfying mass of plants, one thick and rich enough to make a viewer think he could stand there forever, just looking. Diversity attempts to include as many beautiful plants as possible—for flower, foliage, leaf, twig, or berry, offering visual delight for as many calendar months as can be. But to these one might add another D, the stern word Discipline. For always, we aim for a garden that is not merely a collection of pretty flowers, and still less a nursery of them waiting to be organized, but rather a picture that has been composed, and that—if we are very stern with ourselves—can always be made better. ♡