



Flowers blend with foliage in summer. All photos © Andrew Hogarth.

Hardy perennials in East Lothian

Andrew Hogarth

We started planting hardy perennials on a large scale in many of our public parks and other open spaces in 2000. The thinking has been to give the public attractive floral displays that are both significantly cheaper and more environmentally friendly than seasonal bedding. In a few places we have been able to increase the size of beds i.e. more plants but still have a reduced environmental impact as perennials do not need to be brought on in greenhouses with the need for compost, heat and watering as well as extra labour. We have located relatively large beds for maximum impact at key sites such as gateways to towns and villages. This type of planting is along lines pioneered by the late Alan Bloom in his well-known island beds of herbaceous plants which moved away from the traditional herbaceous border with its emphasis on staking to support often rather tall plants. Island beds show off

the plants from all directions and allow for more variety in height with key plants standing out and thought given to structure and foliage as well as the floral interest.

Practicalities

Many of our rose and shrub beds were tired and needed reworking while roses in particular can be disappointing when not in flower and some cultivars are too prone to disease. Our move into perennials was helped by the presence of Macplants on our doorstep one of the largest growers of a very wide range of hardy plants in the country.

The plans for each bed have to take into account soil conditions, drainage patterns, how exposed it is, whether there are sightlines to be maintained for traffic on adjacent roads, how much human - and dog - pressure affect

the site - is it by a school or shopping centre. Some coastal beds can be affected by salt spray. However certain principles apply to all the planting. We have to allow space for machinery to cut the surrounding grass. We usually plant in April and May to allow plants a full growing season to settle in. We plant quite small plants at a relatively high density of five one litre pots per square metre. This means the plants quickly fill in the available space to give a fairly immediate effect and help suppress weeds. We no longer use chemical weed killers on our beds but do mulch them liberally with recycled green waste from the county's bin collections. This material is processed for us by a local contractor whose process reaches high enough temperature to kill disease organisms and weed seeds - something that often does not happen with home composting by amateur gardeners.

Sustainability

After nearly 20 years for some beds none have needed to be completely replaced though with some we have carried out partial replanting. Many herbaceous plants lend themselves readily to lifting and splitting though we do this less often than many amateur growers as the labour time taken can outweigh the cost of buying young plants from a wholesale nursery. Maintenance is largely confined to cutting down dead top growth in autumn. Some 'architectural' plants may be left as their dead stems can give winter interest especially when rimed with frost.

The plants

We use tried and tested cultivars and usually go for the more vigorous types. Catmint 'Six Hills Giant' is a good example of a trouble free plant which only needs trimming over after flowering to stay neat for the whole year. Its foliage gives an attractive grey blue texture to the front of borders. It combines well with *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', the Russian sage, which is a shrub not a herbaceous plant. Both are very attractive to bees. A group of invaluable plants are the hardy geraniums. The relatively new blue 'Rozanne' is sterile so flowers for much longer than older varieties. However we still use old favourites

such as 'Wargrave Pink' and the earlier flowering *macrorrhizum* cultivars 'Bevan's' and 'Ingwersens Varieties'. The low growing 'Russell Pritchard' and 'Mavis Simpson' also do well as ground cover. *Erigeron* 'Sea Breeze' is a very tough plant for the front of a bed; it even seeds into cracks in nearby walls. The day lilies *Hemerocallis* are another good group of plants with a long flowering season and the clump forming habit ideal for suppressing weeds. The very dwarf forms of *Persicaria affinis* such as 'Darjeeling Red' are excellent for ground cover at the edge of beds. Later sedums such as 'Autumn Joy' are good for late summer interest to humans and attract bees and butterflies. However some of the purple and variegated forms can be weak growers so not suitable for our requirements.

The taller *Persicaria amplexicaule* is a very useful plant which makes lots of weed smothering growth to fill spaces and is also long flowering. Other good doers for the middle of borders include many from the daisy family notably hardy stalwarts *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty' and *Rudbeckia* 'Goldsturm'. The purple *Echinacea purpurea* makes a good impact plant but can be short lived on some soils. Although it needs adequate moisture the tall growing *Eupatorium purpureum* does well with us despite our relatively dry summers at least on the better soils. *Cephalaria gigantea*, the giant scabious, is another good tall perennial. We don't use some traditional herbaceous perennials due to their need for staking or susceptibility to disease. A classic example comes with the Michaelmas daisies. However some such as *Aster amellus* 'King George' are worth growing as they don't share these faults. Statement plants give variation to a bed. Red hot poker *Kniphofia* and the cardoon *Cyanara cardunculus*, a close relative of the globe artichoke, and also edible though so far no one has tried to harvest any of ours, are two examples. For a very different texture the old favourite *Gypsophila* 'Bristol Fairy' is still good. *Crocsmia* are now available in several colours; the tall and vigorous 'Lucifer' is one of the better ones for our purposes. It and the old orange yellow form



Planting at high density to suppress weeds and give quick effect.



Planting enhances structures and signage.





Rudbeckia 'Goldsturm' is a reliable stand by plant.



Hemerocallis have a long flowering period.



Sedum spectabile in front of Helenium 'Moerheim Beauty.'



There are several useful cultivars of Polygonum amplexicaule.



Vertical effect from Salvia 'Blue Queen'.



Hardy geraniums are invaluable ground cover plants.

once known as monbretia have gone wild in some areas of Scotland but in a public park such vigour is desirable. In some coastal locations we now find some *Salvias nemorosa* forms such as 'East Friesland' can cope with what are now usually milder winters.

Recent years have seen an increase in the popularity of grasses - though many of the 'grasses' sold in garden centres are botanically sedges. They can be very effective in a bed devoted to these plants but some do not integrate well with more traditional herbaceous subjects while some can look scruffy after a few years. The fescue 'Elijah Blue' is an example. For vertical effect we use *Calamagrostis* and *Stipa gigantea* though this can take a while to settle. For a really bold statement consider the different forms of pampas grass *Cortaderia* though you too often see an over large one dominating small gardens; or phormiums. We also use the pheasant's tail grass formerly *Stipa arundinacea* now *Anemanthella lessonia* which

becomes almost orange in good light in winter. The pony tail or Mexican feather grass which was *Stipa* now *Nassella tenuissima* adds graceful movement to a bed even in the slightest breeze.

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Andrew has spent 37 years gardening in East Lothian. He is currently the acting Principal Amenity Officer for the county and was awarded the British Empire Medal in the New Year's Honours list. He has always been the liaison person between the council and local groups taking part in what is now Beautiful Scotland where all have enjoyed considerable success. He designs horticultural features throughout East Lothian His work has been recognised within the council with an Employee of the Year award while East Lothian's high standard of public horticulture has led to several Beautiful Scotland awards including the Caley trophy. He is a judge for Beautiful Scotland for categories where East Lothian is not involved.