



Gardens

Great plains

Planted with late-blooming grasses and flowers, designer Tom Stuart-Smith's wild prairie garden looks after itself. Jodie Jones picks up a few tips





**T**om Stuart-Smith lives only a mile or two from the thundering interchange where the A5 meets the M1, but the final leg of the journey to his home takes you down a single-track lane that makes you hold your breath and pray nothing comes the other way. Open roads roll away on all sides and there is scarcely a house in sight. Stuart-Smith was born in this rural corner of Hertfordshire and made his first experiments in gardening here, around the house where his parents still live. Nearly 30 years ago, he moved next door, into a converted barn where he and his wife, Sue, raised their three children and made a garden of their own. At the same time he has built up an international garden design practice, with a shelf-full of Chelsea gold medals and gained a reputation for work that is cerebral in conception and supremely beautiful in execution. The barn garden is both Stuart-Smith's test bed and his inspiration. "I haven't done something myself, I always feel a bit of a fraud suggesting it to clients," he says. Fortunately, I have been able to gradually extend our boundaries as we have bought land from my brother, who owns the surrounding farmland." These days, Stuart-Smith gardens on a grand scale. He has more than 10 acres of ornamental gardens around the house, six acres of enriched wildflower meadows, paths of woodland and, since 2010, a half-acre prairie meadow. He was attracted to the prairie concept because it is such a different way of managing the land," he says. In part, it is a deconstruction of the new perennial style pioneered by Piet Oudolf, in part a heightened interpretation of the sort of natural prairies still to be found in the American midwest. Perennial plants, especially American natives such as echinaceas and rudbeckias, are grown in close proximity to create a self-sustaining community that requires little conventional management. It is a bonus that many of these plants flower later in the year, extending the season right through October.

"I needed to raise my own prairie from seed to understand the development and management of



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#### Tom Stuart-Smith's top perennial prairie plants

Try growing these prairie stalwarts to create a succession of flowers right through to the first frosts.

**Early summer** Beardlip penstemon (*Penstemon barbatus*), carthusian pink (*Dianthus carthusianorum*)

**July** Pale purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), button snakeroot (*Eryngium yuccifolium*)

**August** Prairie blazing star (*Liatris pycnostachya*), great coneflower (*Rudbeckia maxima*)

**September and October** Mauve-flowered starwort (*Aster turbinellus*), Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), tall coreopsis (*Coreopsis tripteris*)

this style of planting," Stuart-Smith says. In search of an appropriate seed mix, he turned to James Hitchmough, professor of horticultural ecology at the University of Sheffield, who collaborated on the vast planting schemes at the London Olympic site.

For Stuart-Smith, Hitchmough tailored a combination of more than 50 species, predominantly from North America, chosen to suit a site that was largely free-draining, with one area of compressed clay. The seed weighed less than a bag of sugar but cost several thousand pounds. With much at stake, the site was prepared meticulously. First, the entire area was sprayed with weed killer, then marked out in a swirling pattern of meandering paths and enormous undulating beds. These beds were covered in a 10cm layer of sand, doing double duty as a weed-suppressing mulch and a free-draining seed bed. The seed was bulked out with huge quantities of sawdust, making it

**Prairie lights:** Sky blue aster (*A. azureus*) and button snakeroot. Previous pages: (right) a grass path runs through a perennial meadow of rudbeckia and asters, and (left) the leaves of tall tickseed turn red as autumn approaches

easier to distribute evenly and, on a windless day, the prairie was sown.

Despite such careful preparation, the first year was "a nightmare", says Stuart-Smith. "You need the utmost vigilance in those early days. Allow one errant weed to get out of control, and you will struggle forever to redress the balance. But weed meticulously for the first year or so and the prairie will pretty much look after itself after that."

"Maintenance is simple: early each spring, we cut it all down. Towards the end of the season, if I've noticed anything starting to overwhelm its neighbours, we thin it out to redress the balance."

Five years down the line, on a sunny late-summer day, Stuart-Smith's prairie reverberates with colour. Giant yellow daisies of tall tickseed (*Coreopsis tripteris*) wave several metres in the air and the late aster, *A. novae-angliae* 'September Ruby', paints magenta pools across the beds. Here and there, a fiery red-hot poker or yellow-tipped Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) pushes up through the surrounding vegetation, and the air reverberates with birdsong and the buzz of bees.

The scale is breathtaking, but Stuart-Smith sees prairie potential even in smaller gardens. "You wouldn't want one by the house," he concedes, "but if you can find somewhere slightly set apart, it is worth trying. It would look best within a cleanly defined framework, perhaps of low hedges or lawn grass."

Stuart-Smith has learned that an established prairie requires only a 10th of the maintenance of a conventional border. While herbaceous beds are fed, staked and pruned to give the illusion of natural beauty, a prairie looks after itself. "All gardens are manipulated spaces, but in this prairie there is a sense that you have just enabled it," Stuart-Smith says. "There is no design beyond the seed mix. It is an encounter with nature." ●

Suppliers include Jelitto, [jelitto.com](http://jelitto.com), and Prairie Nursery, [prairienursery.com](http://prairienursery.com)