



Noel's garden is three-quarters of an acre and contains an annexe, where he writes his books.

TRIED & TESTED

Garden writer **Noel Kingsbury**'s own plot at Montpelier Cottage, a trial ground for his planting experiments, comes into its own at this time of year

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

This year has been the first that I have felt really happy with the garden. My wife Jo and I moved here 10 years ago, and of course immediately started making a garden.

Jo likes to grow annual flowers for cutting as well as pelargoniums and petunias around the house; she also does mosaics, which do a lot to add life and colour to the garden all year round. My main interest, apart from the joy of creating and making use of a garden, was to continue my →



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→ research into planting combinations. I am interested in developing ornamental plant mixes that reduce maintenance and which might be used on a larger scale in public places. Our garden, then, is a mix of the cheerfully traditional and the very naturalistic - sometimes wildly naturalistic - taking up about three-quarters of an acre, along with three acres of wildflower meadow.

Since I have written several books with the Dutch designer Piet Oudolf, people often wonder if I have a 'Piet Oudolf garden' - I don't! I prefer to have something less precisely planned, with a lot of natural spreading and seeding. I am also more interested in colour, of which I try to have plenty as soon as the weather allows. I've been hugely influenced by the planting styles that have been developed for public plantings in Germany, which are naturalistic, long lived, wildlife friendly and based on thorough research. I have also found inspiration

ABOVE The dense planting by the house includes swathes of rudbeckia, hollyhocks, *Helioopsis helianthoides* and *Pycnanthemum pilosum*.

ABOVE RIGHT A beautiful haze of *Nassella tenuissima* (aka *Stipa tenuissima*), verberna and acanthus edges the decked path to the terrace.

in the work of my colleagues at the University of Sheffield, who have been researching planting combinations since the 1990s.

The soil here is a very fertile heavy loam and holds moisture, which many gardeners might think is a good thing - indeed it is for vegetables, fruit and roses. For growing perennials and grasses, it is more of a challenge, as the pressure of weed growth is considerable, and many perennials grow to enormously lush proportions, which can create problems in itself. I shall never forget having Jonas Reif, the editor of a leading German garden magazine, around for lunch one day - he was astonished at the size of our willow gentians (*Gentiana asclepiadea*); for us, these are a very good flower for August, with their enormous arching sprays of blue trumpets.

I am passionately interested in wildflower habitats and what we can learn from them as gardeners and managers of landscapes. American

tallgrass prairie is a good model (fertile soil, moisture) and the source of some of our best border plants. We have masses of the most civilised goldenrod for gardens, *Solidago rugosa*, which attracts large numbers of butterflies; and a blue aster, *Aster puniceus*, whose seed I collected in a marsh in New York State, and which has self-sown here ever since. These mix well with perennials from other lush habitats, such as the tall herb flora found in mountain regions, where moving nutrient-rich water continually feeds plants from below. Again, many very good border plants are from this habitat, such as *Persicaria amplexicaulis*, →



LEFT The annexe in the garden has a verandah with seating to enjoy the view. The building houses a study and a guest bedroom. It has a green roof and was constructed using a timber frame structure with a straw-clay infill.



ABOVE The stone-paved terrace has views out over Noel's three acres of meadows, and the areas he uses to trial planting combinations. Tibetan prayer flags flutter like bunting above the dining set and pots of bright annuals.



→ which gives us two months of colour from August onwards. Big ornamental grasses like *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' are a superb complement for these perennials.

More challenging has been my attempts at creating a 'stylised meadow' planting. The idea is to use a small ornamental grass en masse, and dot perennials into it. *Briza media* works well, but soon looks untidy. The very popular *Stipa tenuissima* (aka *Nassella tenuissima*) is far better, with its long-lasting, wonderfully fluffy seedheads, but it self-seeds only reluctantly on our soil. I will now try the pink-flowered

wild barley, *Hordeum jubatum*, and hope that it seeds well.

Having plants self-seeding is a crucial part of what makes this garden work. Self-seeding plants do a lot of the work for you, and put themselves in places that we would never have thought of, or where we would never have succeeded in getting them growing. Some can, of course, become problematic, but on heavier soils this is rare. The greatest success here has been a seed strain of *Aquilegia vulgaris*, which continues to sow and spread and maintain amazing genetic diversity, continually throwing up new colours and flower shapes - they are our dominant plant in May. Earlier in the year, we use a lot of Barnhaven primulas, which, once they finish flowering, go semi-dormant and don't mind being covered by larger perennials.

One self-seeder is crucial in late summer: *Origanum laevigatum*. The bees love it, and so it complements the English marigolds (*Calendula*



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BELOW LEFT

A glass sculpture from Germany glimmers in the sunlight, setting off the planting of sanguisorbas, asters and grasses. Beyond is Noel's yurt. **ABOVE** This bistro set sits among the planting of *Verbena bonariensis* and *Stipa gigantea*.

officinalis) and *Echium vulgare*, which Jo grows for her bees. Although asters, goldenrods and other prairie plants will continue to flower well into October or even later, it is seedheads which are increasingly important from now on, those of grasses particularly.

The garden is a lot of work, but we keep on top of it with Diana Sessarego's help one day a week, so in total it's about two to three days' work a week. After 10 years, we are getting to the point of wanting to reshape areas - which is, I suppose, a sign that a garden has got to some level of maturity.

Montpelier Cottage, Brilley, Whitney-on-Wye, Hereford, Herefordshire HR3 6HF. Open for the National Gardens Scheme on Sunday 13 September, 2-5pm. Find out more about Noel's writing and his work with plant mixes at www.noelkingsbury.com

Jo & Noel's gardening tips

Montpelier Cottage notebook



FLYING THE FLAG FOR COLOUR

By the yurt is one of the tall and narrow Bali flags with a tail at the top that we have dotted around the garden. They act as eyecatchers, and we especially appreciate them in winter, although we always like their constant motion. They come in different colours, which we swap around every now and again.



PRETTY AS A PICTURE

One of Jo's mosaics is a picture frame, which hangs on the verandah of our annexe building. It is a way of encouraging people to think about what they are looking at, either in the garden or in the countryside beyond.

Garden challenges

WEEDS: In this climate, in the countryside, the overwhelming task is to minimise the growth of aggressive colonising native species, notably pasture grasses and nettles. We use an array of methods: hoeing, hand-pulling, spot spraying (with Roundup). Getting on top of grass growth at the end of winter is particularly important.

HIP TO BE SQUARE

Jo trims these box bushes as cubes in our paving. The idea comes from the Mien Ruys Gardens in Holland. She was a great post-war Dutch modernist garden designer whose work is full of playful little touches like this.



Jo & Noel's gardening tips

- **We cut back many perennials** in November, especially if they look untidy. The rest, mostly grasses, are left until February, as they are the main part of the garden aesthetic in winter.
- **In some areas, it is much easier to cut down** perennials, try to chop the stems up as much as possible, and then leave them on the ground as mulch. It is not very tidy, but eliminates the need to remove and compost them. Spring growth soon hides the debris.
- **With prairie plants**, I like to do a late-winter burn, which gets rid of goosegrass seedlings and weed grass very effectively, but does dormant perennials no harm. It needs still, dry weather, and is good fun!
- **Our weed-control strategy** is to keep the ground covered for as long as possible. We plant much denser than is often seen, and as plants seed and spread we'd like to eliminate bare soil altogether.
- **In dense planting**, new introductions often get swamped, or grow slowly. We start them off in a trial bed, and assess for a year or two before planting out.



ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are visiting Noel's garden he recommends:

- **GARDEN Westonbury Mill Water Gardens** An inventive and playful garden built around a series of well-planted ponds and a bog garden, although it is the follies that are the special thing here: there is a water-spouting gargoyle, a water-powered cuckoo clock and a 'bottle grotto'. There is also a very good café for light lunches and teas. Pembridge, Herefordshire HR6 9HZ. Tel: +44 (0)1544 388650. www.westonburymillwatergardens.com
- **GARDEN Hergest Croft Garden** A notable arboretum and a peaceful Edwardian era garden with much plant interest. Good teas in the café and quality plant sales. Ridgebourne Road, Kington, Herefordshire HR5 3EG. Tel: +44 (0)1544 230160. www.hergest.co.uk