

In the foreground, cones of *Echinacea purpurea* 'Rubinglow' and seedheads of *Thalictrum lucidum* stand out against a backdrop of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Professor Richard Hansen'. *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau' and *echinacea* lie beyond.

# Fire & ice

Sussex Prairies looks wonderful during winter months, when the bare, frosted structures of the planting come to the fore - and before it all goes up in flames... ►

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS PATTIE BARRON



**RIGHT** *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Professor Richard Hansen' (off centre) contrasts with the coppery spires of *Lythrum salicaria* 'Blush' and *Festuca glauca* 'Elijah Blue' by the pond.

**BELOW** Six blocks of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Kleine Silberspinne' stretch down the central spine of the garden.

**A**t a lean time of the year, when most other gardens have died down, Sussex Prairies looks sensational. 'On a frosty day, it's so utterly beautiful, like an ice kingdom,' says Pauline McBride, who, with her husband Paul, created this six-acre showcase of prairie planting seven years ago.

'You see the droplets of ice on the grasses and seedheads, and as you walk through, you can hear the ice falling, like glass. The plants are stripped down to their skeletons, and you see the real structure behind all the summer splendour. It's magical.'

This winter beauty is one of the many pluses of growing these kinds of easy-going perennial prairie plants and decorative grasses, most of which stand their ground through the coldest months - that is, of course, if they're left to their own devices, and not cut down in the time-honoured manner of tidy horticultural practice. 'We really leave everything be for wildlife,' explains Paul. 'Goldfinches love teasing the seeds out of the inulas; red polls, linnet, wrens and robins pick at seedheads; and bees, butterflies, hornets and other insects feed off the late nectar and pollen.'

## GARDEN NOTES

Six-acre prairie garden left to stand over winter

We even get deer browsing through. Later on, the plants catch the frost and hold spiders' webs; even the sun shining through the dew looks great. And of course, leaving everything is labour saving.'

The pair fell in love with this naturalistic, freestyle way of planting

when they worked with the master of the art, Piet Oudolf, in Luxembourg years ago. 'That was the seed that gave us the idea that we could do something similar,' says Paul. 'We bought the farmland from Pauline's father. As an agricultural proposition, this 30-acre farm isn't really viable. We wanted

*'You can see the droplets of ice on the grasses and seedheads, and as you walk through, you can hear the ice falling, like glass'*

to find a way of making a living from the land, as well as doing something we enjoyed.'

They designed the garden together, every night for four months over winter 2007, sitting over the drawing board, meticulously itemising the 600 or so different plant varieties on a spreadsheet. 'We considered flowering time, shape, form, colour, season, using about 30% grasses, and trying not to place two grasses together, so there is contrast between flowers and grasses,' says Paul. Only robust cultivars that need no staking, pruning or pampering made the

grade, such as *Sedum* 'Matrona' which, says Paul, doesn't flop and splay out like some sedums.

Faced with a fertile terrain of sticky Sussex clay, they had land drains installed every 10m to make sure the plants wouldn't perish from sitting in wet for three months of the year - a far greater threat than frosts.

Thousands of tons of compost were rotavated into the soil the year before planting. 'Everything else, all the planting, we did with about 40 friends and workers,' says Paul. 'After the initial drainage, the winter after planting we dug by hand around every perimeter and put in drains about a foot down, running down to join the drainage system, so we don't get standing water.'

The design is modern and open-plan. Instead of dividing the area into 'rooms', they have embraced the openness of the landscape by creating borders as a series of interlocking arcs, arranged in the shape of a spiralling nautilus shell, clipping the boundaries of hornbeam hedges to reflect the curves of the South Downs beyond. A seemingly infinite line of six long linear blocks, stretching right down the heart of the garden, make a stunning perspective and hold nothing but the 1.2m-high bronze plumes of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Kleine Silberspinne', bordered all the way round by *Allium* 'Summer Beauty': simple, minimal, perfect. 'We fancied a rill, but couldn't afford one, and ▶

**ABOVE** Pauline designed the bison figures, made by a local steelworks.

**BELOW LEFT** A large bed of *Chasmanthium latifolium* and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zwergelefant', with *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Giraffe' in the background.

**BOTTOM LEFT** The wooden sculpture, 'Fanfare Gateway' is by Janine Creaye ([www.sculptureform.co.uk](http://www.sculptureform.co.uk)). It stands in a bed of *Achillea filipendulina* 'Gold Plate' and *Sporobolus heterolepis* 'Blue Dust'.





**RIGHT** The seedheads of *Echinacea purpurea* 'Green Edge' contrast with *Miscanthus* 'Heiku' (left) and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Cordoba', and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Hermann Müssel' beyond.

**BELOW** Box balls provide winter structure in another area of the garden.

we had a lot of miscanthus left over, so I thought why not make a rill from miscanthus?' says Paul. 'We saw that Piet Oudolf had made a river of blue salvias in Sweden, so we decided to make a pink river and give it a long season. The alliums come up first, and once they are past their best, the miscanthus starts flowering, and then just gets fluffier. When the sun sets, it shines through those big fluffy seedheads and looks amazing.'

He maintains that once these naturalistic plants are settled in, given an annual mulch with compost and irrigated only through the drought days of summer, they pretty much take care of themselves. Grasses, he says, aren't difficult. 'I'd say they are easier than any other kind of plant because even in drought conditions they'll keep going without water. And there's such a large variety, from giant miscanthus to little *Sporobolus heterolepis* 'Blue Dust', the prairie dropseed, with an amazing smell of chopped green coriander.' He's even found a grass that thrives in dry



shade: '*Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Poul Petersen'. We planted it under an oak tree near the house, and it couldn't be happier.'

From January, the main garden tasks are division and propagation. 'We try to produce all the plants we sell ourselves. By digging up the plants and splitting them - it might take five or six years to get round them all - you're gradually renewing the garden.' His tools of choice for this aren't garden forks, but an axe and a sledgehammer. 'With big plants like *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah', or miscanthus, you'd

break the forks. Don't be afraid to get tough; they can take it.'

What happens to last year's growth in spring? That's the easy part: they burn it, making a firebreak to protect the hedges. 'It takes half a day with a blowtorch instead of six weeks to cut it all down and put it through a chipper,' explains Paul, who uses a long lancer, more genteelly used to burn weeds from cracks in patio paving. 'We wait for three dry, windy days in mid- to late February - things start regrowing in early March, so we don't want to burn young shoots - and if the plants

*'We wait for dry, windy days in February... and if the plants are nice and crispy, we set fire to them... the flames move across the ground fast'*



TURN TO  
PG 85 FOR  
TOP WINTER  
SEEDHEADS

are nice and crispy, we set fire to them. You can't pile things up because they'd smoulder for hours, but if there's a strong wind, the flames move across the ground fast, so it doesn't stay hot in one spot for long. I've lit the first plant of *Miscanthus* 'Kleine Silberspinne' in the first bed, and the whole length has gone up in minutes.'

Pauline says visitors can't believe they burn the garden. 'People think of it as destruction, but it's an amazing and exhilarating time. It's cleansing, making way for the new growth. Perhaps we should have called ourselves Phoenix Prairies!'

**Sussex Prairies, Morlands Farm, Wheatsheaf Rd, West Sussex BN5 9AT. Open 1 June-11 Oct 2015, daily except Tues, 1-5pm. Tel: +44 (0)1273 495902. www.sussexprairies.co.uk**

## SUSSEX PRAIRIES NOTEBOOK

### PAUL & PAULINE'S TIPS FOR WINTER INTEREST

- **Flat umbels**, such as those on achilleas, tansies and sedums, look especially good when frosted.
- **The seedheads** of veronicastrums are one of the best in winter. *V. virginicum* 'Spring Dew' has the bendiest seedheads, with a definite 'S' shape.
- **Pick plants that contrast** with one another, such as *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldschleier', which bleaches out to near white, and *Sanguisorba tenuifolia*, which has black stems.
- **Choose plants with big bold seedheads**, such as echinops, which has spiky, spherical heads, and *Phlomis russeliana*, which keeps its candelabra structure on the stems and looks wonderful when you can see through the layers to a contrasting plant such as *Eragrostis curvula*, weeping love grass.
- **Include big plants** that have strong, sculptural silhouettes, such as *Eryngium pandanifolium* and angelica.



### ALSO IN THE AREA

If you visit Sussex Prairies, Paul and Pauline recommend these other nearby places:

- **GARDEN Nymans** Exceptional garden with outstanding trees and collections of South American plants surrounding a romantic Gothic house and ruins within woodland. Handcross, near Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH17 6EB. Tel: +44 (0)1444 405250. [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/nymans](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/nymans)
- **NURSERY Brighton Plants** Niche nursery specialising in drought-tolerant and seaside plants as well as plants for chalky soils. New Hall Lane, Small Dole, West Sussex BN5 9YJ. Tel: +44 (0)7807 594209. [www.brightonplants.co.uk](http://www.brightonplants.co.uk)
- **PLACE TO EAT The Ginger Fox** A friendly gastropub with an emphasis on seasonal, local food. Views over the Sussex Downs. Muddleswood Road, Albourne, West Sussex BN6 9EA. Tel: +44 (0)1273 857888. [www.thegingerfox.com](http://www.thegingerfox.com)



### TEA ON THE GRASS

China tea cups, saucers and teapots give a floating, storybook element to a patch of ornamental switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah', which has faded down from its burgundy foliage of summer. Attached to spikes 1m in height, the flying tea sets are the work of Brighton-based artist Robin Johnson ([www.drifline.co.uk](http://www.drifline.co.uk)).

### GARDEN CHALLENGES

**SELF-SEEDING PLANTS:** 'There are some plants, like *Aster umbellatus*, that have got so bad that I'm going to have to remove them from the garden,' says Paul. '*Thalictrum lucidum* is another nightmare.'



### HOLES IN ONE

An organic wooden sculpture, like a supernatural seed pod, rises from a drift of *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sulivantii* 'Goldsturm'. The hollow carving has softened to a mellow silver colour. It was created by sculptor Si Uwins ([www.siuwins.co.uk](http://www.siuwins.co.uk)), who is inspired by the fruits and seeds of wildflowers.

### BEWITCHING STEMS

Some plants take on a completely different guise in winter - losing one quality, but gaining another. When the petals fall from *Echinacea purpurea*, they leave just the central cone which, says Paul, looks quite dramatic, like witches' hats.

