

Which Plants and Why?

Choosing which plants to grow is a highly subjective process, but if we are to take the line of least resistance and grow only those plants adapted to the available conditions then already we are starting to hone in upon the most suitable. But plants bring with them associations that trigger memories or dreams of other places and these together with our aspirations to create something meaningful for us will drastically reduce the options still further. Culture, climate and context are the key determining factors. Culture and lifestyle will



inevitably play a significant role and this will often be closely linked to the climate of the country in which the garden is being made. Australians use their gardens differently from the English whilst the Swiss Alps is probably not the best place to create a tall grass prairie garden.

But style knows no boundaries and anything is possible within a garden especially when it is isolated from the outside world, as for example an inner city courtyard. Here Australian tree ferns and Asian palms will not seem incongruous in central London, nor even a Japanese tea garden in downtown San Francisco. We link

certain plants with various styles and such associations will strongly influence the atmosphere our planting will have upon a garden space: grasses, astrantias and geraniums suggest a summer meadow, brown leaved sedges and red hot pokers point towards the South African veld, while the pastel tints of campanula bells, delphinium spires and billowing phlox trigger nostalgic thoughts of the perfect English garden in mid summer.

In an effort to control mood we may opt for the minimalist style of planting which conveys a clean modern message and fits the context of contemporary architecture extremely well. Only those plants that present a positive year round image are appro-



Drought tolerant grasses (*Festuca amethystina*) and succulent leaved sedums (*Sedum* 'Red Cauli') suggests a warm sun drenched hillside somewhere exotic to me.

It is important to match the vigor of plants used within a tightly planted perennial meadow. Everything used here will remain compact and moderately low growing. None of these perennials have the tendency to seed around aggressively in the prevailing growing conditions: *Sedum* 'Karfunkelstein', *Origanum* 'Rosenkuppel', *Scutellaria incana*, *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam' and *Pennisetum orientale*.



White variegated hostas and white flowered *Melica altissima* 'Alba' bring light into a shady corner in a garden with moist soil.

By restricting the perennials in this garden to just hardy geraniums and *Alchemilla mollis* both can be cut hard back in mid-summer after their first flush of flowers whereupon they will regrow to form a neat groundcover for the rest of the growing season. Had these same plants been mixed with other late-flowering perennials the removal of their faded flowers would have been far more difficult.

appropriate such as cultivars of *Salvia nemorosa*, *Sedum telephium*, *Bergenia* and *Liriope muscari*; all of which look good mass planted in strict geometric beds. Each style suggests its own pallet of plants and our task will be to find an appropriate style that can be made to work in the growing conditions we can offer.

Naturalistic planting suggest an affinity with nature and presumably a desire to make a positive contribution. Should we therefore restrict our plant choices to native as opposed to exotic species in order to favour the endemic wildlife? My opinion is no, but the choice is yours. For the English, the native flora is extremely limited making the task of creating a stunning flower garden far more difficult than for an American

or even neighbours in continental Europe. Research suggests that wildlife appreciates pollen, nectar and the shelter offered by plants no matter whether they are native or exotic, but there is no reason not to restrict your plant choices to native plants especially in areas where the native vegetation is under threat and needs conserving. Were I to live in South Africa, Australia or New Zealand the idea of a native plant garden would probably appeal more and for someone living in mid America to restrict oneself to natives is no great sacrifice as so many of our favourite garden perennials originate in the once extensive grass prairies found there.

Finally, the compatibility of the plants in a perennial meadow needs to be borne in

mind. Plants that produce excessive amounts of viable seed will create extra work as we will either have to remove the inevitable crop of seedlings each year or prevent this by remove the seed heads immediately after flower. Also some early flowering perennials such as *Alchemilla mollis* and certain hardy geraniums benefit from a drastic cut back after flowering in early summer after which they replenish their foliage and look neat for the rest of the season. Such plants if mixed in with others that flower later will create a difficult job whereas when combined with plants accepting the same treatment such as catmints and early flowering daylilies the whole bed could be cut back in one go with ease.

