PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY

to wildly sow

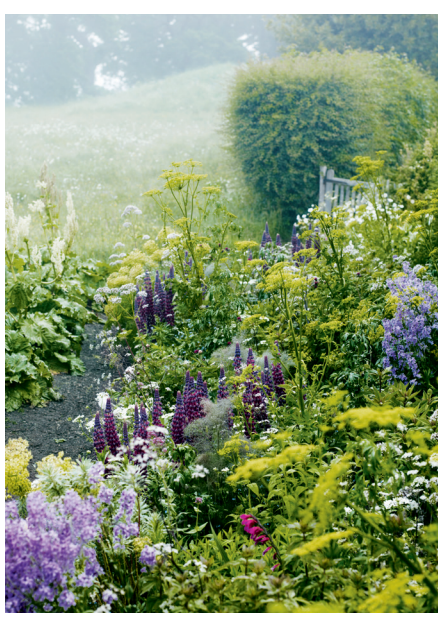
The “New Perennial” movement is breaking boundaries as garden designers unleash their painterly side, says **Helen Chislett**

It’s rare that a film about gardening generates excitement, but earlier this year, *Five Seasons*, a documentary about the work of Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf, was released in the UK to widespread acclaim. Filmmaker Thomas Piper first met Oudolf when working on another cinematic piece about his work on New York’s High Line, a once derelict viaduct that the designer transformed into an urban semi-wilderness. The central narrative of the film follows Oudolf as he creates the now venerated garden at Hauser & Wirth in Somerset.

Originally, Oudolf and his wife Anja ran a garden nursery in the village of Hummelo in the Netherlands. Back then, some 30 years ago, both were devotees of the classic English style of gardening, but this changed in time. “At a certain point we became more interested in the plant than the flower,” he says, “and we began to appreciate the individual personalities of plants, their structure and their texture. That made us question practices such as dead-heading or cutting-back – the famous ‘Chelsea chop’. Why not just leave that to the spring and enjoy these textural qualities through the winter?”

As Oudolf began to explore the artistic possibilities of working with seed heads, leaves and grasses, he used his plantsman knowledge to design gardens that challenged the status quo. “There’s a lot of complexity when you start to work in this way. You need to understand each plant, its life span, where it likes to grow and in what conditions,” he says. “You look for a way to allow each one to express its beauty within a community of other plants, and in doing so, hope to inspire and move people with what you do.”

Left: the Oudolf Field, a 1.5-acre perennial meadow designed by Piet Oudolf for Hauser & Wirth Somerset



Left and bottom: Jinny Blom's "anti-garden" at Rolfs Farm, East Sussex, took five years to create. Below: the garden at Great Dixter, which had a huge influence on Luciano Giubbilei's planting style

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He is constantly influenced by the wilderness beyond the garden, but says often the challenge is to create a garden that looks wilder than it actually is. "There is always a framework that underpins the planting scheme, but the plants create a feeling of looseness and informality," he says.

Since spearheading his quiet garden revolution, Oudolf has found kindred spirits in many British garden designers including Jinny Blom, Sarah Raven and Dan Pearson. Like Oudolf, Blom is a keen advocate of having a formal core structure – "the corset" – and then softening it. For one notable Sussex property, she has created what she describes as an "anti-garden", because it appears so wild. "In fact, it took five years to build and is highly constructed. However, the whole premise was to plant it and then let go," she says. "Of course, you can't let a garden go completely – managing landscape is in the blood – but we wanted to capture that feeling."

Blom cites a meadow in Oxfordshire as a good example of how something that appears wild can be anything but. "A wildflower meadow is not a wilderness – it is a painting of wilderness," she says. "It's not the result of sprinkling some wild seed mix into the ground, but of planting great swathes of poppies, allium, fritillaries and so forth. What people often don't realise is that something that appears whimsical and ethereal is, in fact, the culmination of a great deal of thought and time. Gardening in this way is slow – and that slowness is to be celebrated."

Marcus Barnett has seen a shift in how clients respond to a garden that may appear cautiously haphazard. "There's a tolerance to this style of gardening that is also apparent in the wider design world – such as the Soho House style of interiors," he says. "There is more understanding that you can have disorder within the order. A hint of letting go." Barnett often introduces clients to the idea of a garden "dying well", encouraging them to leave cutting back until the spring, so they can enjoy a garden season that extends through winter. As he says, plants are living, breathing organisms, and it is only possible to have so much control. "That is the joy of planting. An extraordinary amount of care and thought goes into it, but ultimately it will always have a degree of imperfection which creates its own excitement," he explains. "Understanding how plants work together to complement each other throughout the year is key to a great scheme. There's a huge amount of artistic creativity involved in producing the plant palette and the process is much like painting a canvas – playing with colours, light and texture to create a thing of beauty."

Garden designer Debbie Roberts of Nuthurst-based landscaper Acres Wild is of the same mind. She and business partner Ian Smith created a garden for a half-acre site in the Sussex Downs that linked with both the period house and the wilder landscape beyond its boundaries. "Naturally, we had to choose chalk-tolerant plants, but we also wanted to limit the colour palette to soft blues, mauve, cream, green and white to harmonise with the landscape and sky," she says. "Key plants included lavender, hebe, viburnum, euphorbia, lilac, rose, sage, hydrangea and a selection of grasses – nothing too fussy or fiddly." They planted in huge swathes to reflect clumps of trees and hedgerows beyond the flint boundary wall, ensuring year-round interest with spring bulbs, early perennials, late perennials, autumn flowering grasses and sturdy plants that endure over winter, with hydrangea and euphorbia heads creating interesting silhouettes.

Roberts is an admirer of Oudolf, highlighting the way he relies less on summer flower colour as on foliage texture. "We created broad brush strokes across the banks that are in scale with the downland views, while making sure the garden changes in tune with the landscape."

Xa Tollemache has been managing the historic garden of Helmingham Hall in Suffolk since her marriage to its owner, Lord Tollemache, more than 40 years ago. It's proved an enormous training ground for someone who went from being a self-confessed garden ignoramus to a Chelsea gold-medal winner. She describes her borders as "not necessarily horticulturally correct, but free and joyful". The initial design is crucial, she says, "as is scale and proportion – but plants are froth. In summer, the borders here explode with plants, some doing what I want them to do and others popping up in a very undisciplined way." That is something she celebrates. "I do have a picture of how a design will look when I draw the plan, but when I am actually

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREW MONTGOMERY (2)

Right: this scheme in Sussex by Acres Wild is designed to evolve in tune with the surrounding landscape. **Below:** at Helmingham Hall, Suffolk, Xa Tollemache describes her borders as "not necessarily correct, but free and joyful"

PHOTOGRAPH: MARIANNE MAJERUS

"You have to embrace the fact that nature will play its part. We are artists, but we don't have full control of the brush"

digging the plants in, I am like an artist applying extra strokes of the brush," she says.

It is a sentiment echoed by Sarah Raven, who loves to create gardens where "one thing goes over and another emerges". Rarely, however, does she use a rigid planting plan. "I have the right overall number of plants and a balance of colours, texture and shape – but then I just go for it," she says. Raven adds grasses into her schemes for light and movement. "My current favourite is *Panicum capillare* 'Sparkling Fountain' which is loved by garden birds, is self-seeding and looks gracefully elegant," she says. "I also recommend *Veronicastrum*, *Persicaria orientalis*, *Stipa gigantea* and *Dierama* for arching wands and a touch of drama." Her Oast Garden at Perch Hill in East Sussex is a rich mix of salvia, agapanthus, nasturtium, geranium, alliums, eryngium and acanthus – a composition that mixes flower, foliage and seed head to great effect. "We stack a lot of plants on top of each garden here, using layering down into the ground [where the stem of a low-growing, flexible plant is bent and the middle section held in place underground so that roots form along the stem] as well as expanding out."

Marie-Louise Agius of landscape architects Balston Agius is also an advocate of "considered wildness" underpinned by a well-conceived design rationale. "Rhythm is an important element of putting a design together, so that there is consistency within borders and certain elements are not all clumped together," she says. "You want to step into a garden and for your eyes to dance. Gardening is three-dimensional painting in a sense, so when you are imagining it in your head, you have to envisage all the layering from the spring bulbs to winter structure." A meadow is a good example of something that has to be highly considered. "Some seeds may germinate better than others year-on-year according to climate, so you may plant 25 species and see only five one year and 20 the next," she says.

For a site in Wiltshire, Agius's studio created a meadow around a mount made from used rubble and planted trees such as lime, birch and oak, which punctuate the space. "The grass was left to grow and seed with cow parsley and other perennials that were allowed to spread naturally," she says. "At the same time, bulbs were planted intensively, including snowdrops, *Narcissus lobularis*, *Crocus tommasinianus*, fritillaries, Old Pheasant's Eye Narcissus and camassia. The colours change as the seasons progress, but these multilayers mean the meadow can be enjoyed at any time of year."

Garden designer Luciano Giubbilei cites his residency at the legendary garden of Great Dixter as having been a huge influence on his own style of planting. "You can have intention as a designer, but it is always slightly out of your hands," he says. "You have a vision in your head – the height of the plants, the colour of the flowers and so on – but you have to accept and embrace the fact that nature will also play its part. Wind and rain can tangle plants together in a very beautiful way, for example. We are artists, but we don't have full control of the brush."

In Dan Pearson's own garden in Somerset, he has drawn on the context of surrounding meadows and open hillside to blur the boundaries between cultivated garden and managed land. "Colour comes and goes as it does in the meadows, so the garden is never the same place twice," he says. "The smokiness of the meadows is captured in the diffused colour suspended in the *Sanguisorba*, *Thalictrum* and *Verbena* 'Lavender Spires', the semi-transparency of which draws your eye easily through the space and provides fluidity. Contrasting pinpricks of brilliant colour such as *Potentilla* 'Gibson's Scarlet' are juxtaposed with lime-green euphorbia." For Pearson, planting should ebb and flow, with the focus changing through the seasons. "You tell a story through planting that is particular to each environment and a means of taking you deeper into that place," he says. "I admire gardens that show freedom of expression and reverence for the wild." ✦

THE WILD BUNCH

Acres Wild, acreswild.co.uk. **Balston Agius,** balstonagius.co.uk. **Dan Pearson Studio,** danpearsonstudio.com. **Jinny Blom,** jinnyblom.com. **Luciano Giubbilei,** lucianogiubbilei.com. **Marcus Barnett Studio,** marcusbarnett.com. **Piet Oudolf,** oudolf.com. **Sarah Raven,** sarahraven.com. **Xa Tollemache,** xa-tollemache.co.uk.