

High Times

Our garden is full of perennials; our garden is full of *tall* perennials and grasses to be more exact. There was nothing deliberate about it; it just happened and we rather like it.

By the end of summer everything is at maximum height, high times indeed.

Much of the height in the garden is provided by grasses. Yes I know they were to the 90's what conifers were to the 70's and now of course totally out of fashion. Think of them as "retro" if that makes you happy.

The most dramatic and earliest to reach for the sky is *Stipa gigantea*, the Giant Spanish Oats. Some people tell me theirs won't flower. My advice is "do nothing". Don't feed, don't cut back the leaves, don't water, don't shade them; just take off the old flower stems in February and comb out any dead leaves. Then stand back and enjoy the glittering display between late May and next February as the flower heads catch the rays of the sinking sun and dance on the breeze.

I wax less lyrically about *Miscanthus* although you'll find plenty around the garden. I particularly like the gold-banded types. We have *Hinjo*, *Zebrina* and *Pünktchen* in various spots (pun not intended). They all look more or less the same to me and make equally good partners for the sunny daisies like *Heleniums*, *Helianthus* and *Heliopsis*. I'm looking at *Zebrina* growing alongside *Helianthus* *Lodden Gold* and *Verbena bonariensis* as I type and thinking it's a partnership I need to preserve.

We have quite a lot of the green, or silver striped types as well. These can get a little too bulky a little too quickly but praise where it's due to *Gracillimus* for its vase-shaped outline and to *Kleine Silberspinne* for those little silver spiders that are its flowers.

Sometimes overlooked, *Molinia* (Moor Grass) are putting on their restrained and elegant show at the moment. The tallest of these, *Windspiel* is sadly curtailed due to dry soil in June and July but *Transparent* is at its gauzy best.

Colonising our small pond is *Cyperus longus* a native, hardy version of *Papyrus* with its "umbrella rib" flower heads. At only 4ft tall it qualifies for a mention as the tallest water plant in the garden.

Picking out the "highlights" of the tall daisies in our garden is always likely to leave some very good performances on the cutting room floor. Looking around at the moment I can see so many vying for attention.

When I bought *Rudbeckia laciniata* *Hortensia* the label said "4ft tall". This year, as always, it has topped 7ft but sadly it's a bit too floppy for its own good. The double, golden yellow flowers make it all worthwhile though. *Rudbeckia* *Herbstsonne* is only a little way behind in height but its self-supporting and those droopy-petaled, lemon yellow flowers are a magnet for butterflies.

Helianthus are normally vying for the top spot but are a little behind this year. The delicious Lemon Queen with those small but delicately toned flowers that are just starting to stud the 5-6ft stems. Lodden Gold has double deep yellow blooms and Capenoch Star with smile-making, large, anemone-centred blooms. Both rarely exceed 5ft tall.

We have our pick of Heleniums as we hold the National Collection. This year the tallest are a little shorter than normal but the red and yellow Puck, pure yellow Sunshine Superman and boldly patterned red and yellow Vicky are all over 5ft 6in tall. Amber is another, aptly-named 5 footer, as is the brown coned, yellow of Bressingham Gold.

The received wisdom is to plant low at the front, high at the back but sometimes breaking the rules is very worthwhile. A seedling of the 6-8ft Eupatorium maculatum Atropurpureum (“Joe Pye Weed”) sprung up at the front corner of one section of our long border and it is clothed from top to bottom with those fluffy pale purple flower heads and dripping with bees and hoverflies. It looks so architectural: a towering column of flower, leaves and those lovely purple stems.

Joining the show very late indeed are the Actaea (formally Cimicifuga) with the fragrant Pink Spike leading way followed by Pritchard’s Giant and the shorter White Pearl. These do look good in bud for weeks before the bottlebrush flowers open.

The small, sheltered, south-facing bed beside our garage is crowded with tall guys like the 7ft Lobelia tupa, the even taller Salvia atrocyanea with its arching stems and royal blue flowers.

Standing head and shoulders above it all is Maclayea microcarpa – the plume poppy – which will top out at around 12ft this year and yet it has the pose and grace to remain elegant and not overbearing.

But do high times mean high stakes? Well. Being a lazy gardener I stake only as a last resort and in most cases the plants hold themselves up without help. The only task is shredding those long stems ready for composting at the end of the season.

Martin and Janet run SpecialPerennials.com in Hankelow and open their garden for the NGS. In 2014 it will be open from 2-5pm on 16, 19, 20 and 23 July; 6, 9,10 & 20 August; 3,13 & 14 September.

.

.