

# Natural planting back to the fore

*Innovation,  
creativity and  
controversy –  
**Tim Richardson**  
takes a look at how  
gardens and  
gardening have  
evolved over the  
past decade*

**T**he Noughties has been a time of great excitement and change, following a decade that saw lots of sound and fury (all those Nineties “makeovers” involving decking, barbecues and blue walls, courtesy of Ground Force team Alan Titchmarsh, Charlie Dimmock and Tommy Walsh), signifying not very much in the end.

The past decade, on the other hand, has seen a new planting style from Europe sweeping to popularity. If the Nineties was all about lifestyle and showing off, the Noughties have proven to be a more reflective period for Britain’s gardeners, who have hunkered down with nature in terms of planting style, horticultural technique and a mellowed-out attitude to personal space.

## Trends from Europe

The future arrived from Holland in the form of snowy-haired designer Piet Oudolf (pronounced Peet Oudolf). He had been making gardens for a select group of British clients in the late Nineties, but he really burst into public consciousness around the turn of the millennium courtesy of a series of books on how to create naturalistic gardens using a palette of grasses and mainly tall perennials, the most successful of which was *Designing With Plants* (1999), in collaboration with Noel Kingsbury.

Oudolf designed gardens at Pensthorpe nature reserve in Norfolk (2000) and at RHS Wisley in Surrey (2002), where the RHS’s endorsement, although controversial at the time, reflected the impact this “new perennials” style was already having. Today, many British gardens betray Oudolf’s influence to some degree:

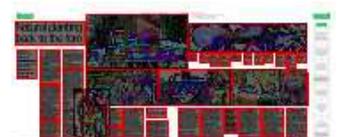
he has persuaded gardeners to make grasses and taller perennials a key feature of the garden, which is now more often planted for form and structure than for colour.

Shrubs, which were starting to fall from popularity even in the Eighties, have been increasingly replaced by grasses and other bulky plants as structural subjects – much to the chagrin of some traditional plantmen.

## The new naturalism

Against this backdrop, the 20th-century ideal of the colour-themed mixed border as the culmination of a gardener’s art quickly gave way to the concept of creating a garden that is at ease with itself and its surroundings.

The signature colour combination of the late Nineties was the vivid red of the dahlia ‘Bishop of Llandaff’ and orange



cannas prefaced by the purple haze of *Verbena bonariensis* (all courtesy of Christopher Lloyd at Great Dixter). A decade later it has morphed into the golden-russet, late-summer tones of grasses such as calamagrostis or molinia, offset by spires of digitalis, verbascum, persicaria and salvias, or the fluffy plumes of filipendula and thalictrum, all waving gently in the wind before visibly decomposing through winter.

It is the shape of the plant that matters in new perennials, with repetition and rhythm created by means of daisy forms (rudbeckias, echinacea, asters, inulas) or flat-capped umbellifers such as sedum, angelica, eupatorium and achillea.

The meadow-garden movement can be related to this general trend towards naturalism, and in the past few years it has been developed in the hands of the "Sheffield School" of landscape designers, who are recreating naturalistic habitats in public spaces with little self-conscious design in the mix.

Green roofs are part of their remit, while fashionable green walls or vertical gardens remain the preserve of French designer Patrick Blanc, who is the only person out there with the technical ability to make them last, it seems.

### The plants we loved

Away from grasses and tall perennials, among the plant trends we have seen in the Noughties are the continuing niche predilection for snowdrops and unabated interest in alliums. Meanwhile, corydalis, digitalis,

salvias, hellebores, thalictrum and euphorbia have all become general nursery staples alongside the hardy and ever-reliable geraniums and pulmonarias. Herbaceous

perennials remain the undisputed focus for most gardeners, while the ever-popular rose shows no sign of fading in its appeal, with characterful old shrub roses still the choice of the cognoscenti.

### Conceptual gardens

At the other end of the design spectrum, the non-naturalistic garden and landscape design has also begun to make an appearance on the British garden scene, in the shape of conceptualist landscape design – that is, design based primarily on ideas, often utilising colourful forms and non-natural materials.

A burgeoning interest for these "avant gardeners" has been

reflected in a series of dedicated, albeit short-lived shows, such as the much admired Westonbirt Festival (2002-2005) and Future Gardens (2009), while the RHS's Hampton Court show now stages a conceptualist section. This year, conceptualist design even made it into the main show garden arena at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

A thoughtful attitude to gardens was reflected in the short-lived

Modern Gardens Open Day (2004-2005) and continues to grow courtesy of discussion groups such as Thinkinggardens ([www.thinkinggardens.co.uk](http://www.thinkinggardens.co.uk)). Meanwhile, the revamped Garden Museum in London has in the past couple of years become the hub and meeting place for British gardeners. The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew got in on the art/gardening act with critically acclaimed exhibitions on the work of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly and an important outdoor retrospective of Henry Moore.

### Restoration projects

This has been a period of retrenchment and reflection for organisations such as the National

Trust, after a bonanza of restoration and visitor-centre construction during the Nineties, not all of it well advised. The most interesting developments have been in new plantings for colour and scent in 18th-century landscape gardens such as Painshill and Stowe. These were previously thought of, erroneously, as "green gardens" with few flowers. The most impressive restoration – or recreation – of the decade was also the most controversial: the Elizabethan garden at Kenilworth Castle by English Heritage, which opened this summer.

English Heritage has initiated several other admirable historic projects, including the reinstatement of the great fountain and

surrounding parterres at Witley Court in Worcestershire. One outstanding one-off garden project was the Duchess of Northumberland's extraordinary revamp of the walled gardens at Alnwick, Northumberland (2002), incorporating a gigantic cascade. Meanwhile, the threat to historic Greenwich Park, which has been earmarked for the equestrian element of the 2012 Olympics (entailing a 23,000-seat arena and 6km eventing course), is being opposed by the Garden History Society and local residents.

### Climate change becomes mainstream

The Eden Project in Cornwall

opened in 2001 as a prescient reflection of environmental preoccupations on a tourist-attraction scale. Increasingly, garden owners are thinking of their plots as part of a continuum of the surrounding ecology, encouraging wildlife to thrive as much as possible while accommodating their own leisure needs and horticultural interests. The garden is cherished ever more as a private sanctuary and a refuge from modern life now that the home has been invaded by the internet and mobile phone.

Related to the ecological emphasis is the surge in popularity of allotments and the home-growing of fruit and veg, particularly noticeable in the past two years. The



phenomenon of the celebrity

gardener/cook came to the fore mid-decade, reflecting the fact that most gardeners are cooks (although the reverse is less often true).

There are no reliable statistics on this, but it appears that “grow-your-own” has attracted large numbers of younger people to gardening – those in their twenties as opposed to their thirties – which has to be good news for the future.

Back in the Nineties gardens were heralded as fashionable or “sexy” in the mainstream press – when they weren’t really, of course. Today, with allotment chic in full swing, it appears they might actually be quite cool. If so, we had better make the most of it. Nothing in the garden, and nothing in gardening, stays still for long.

*Shrubs have been increasingly replaced by grasses and other bulky plants*

**Designs of the decade**

**2000**

**Garden House, Devon** Influential naturalistic garden developed by Keith Wiley

**2001**

**Eden Project, Cornwall** Vast Lottery-funded eco-extravaganza fashioned out of the craters of an old tin mine

**2002**

**Alnwick Walled Garden, Northumberland** Controversial new development, including cascade and giant tree-house

**2003**

**Scampston Hall, Yorkshire** Walled garden designed by Piet Oudolf

**2004**

**Diana Memorial Fountain, London** Controversial project by Gustafson Porter of London

**2005**

**Mile End Park, London** New linear park that incorporates the Green Bridge and Ecology Park

**2006**

**Deer Shelter** Skyspace by James Turrell at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

**2007**

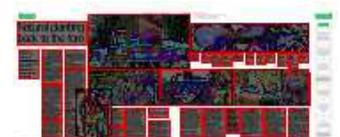
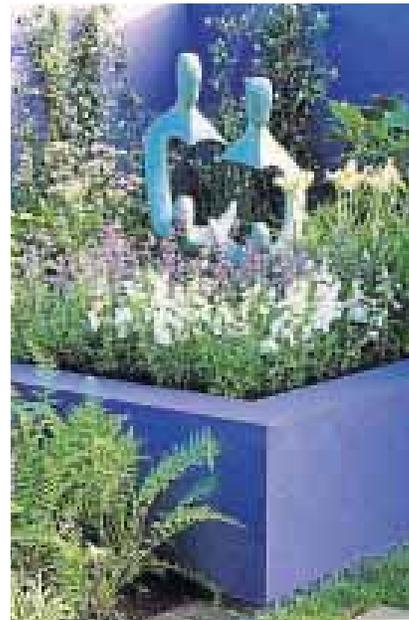
**Potters Field Park, London** Modernist park by Gross Max and Piet Oudolf, next to the Mayor’s office on the Thames

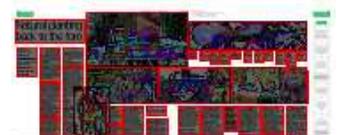
**2008**

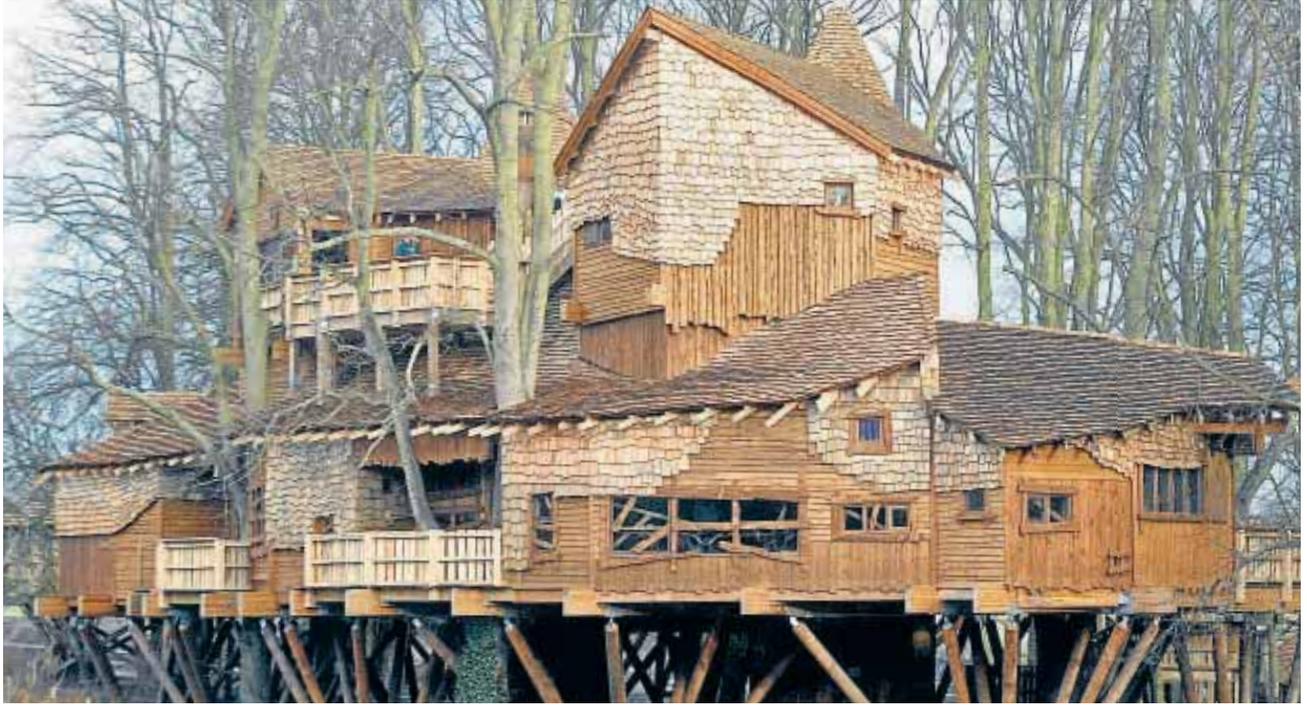
**Trentham Gardens, Staffordshire** Restoration of Victorian parterres with plantings by Tom Stuart-Smith and Piet Oudolf

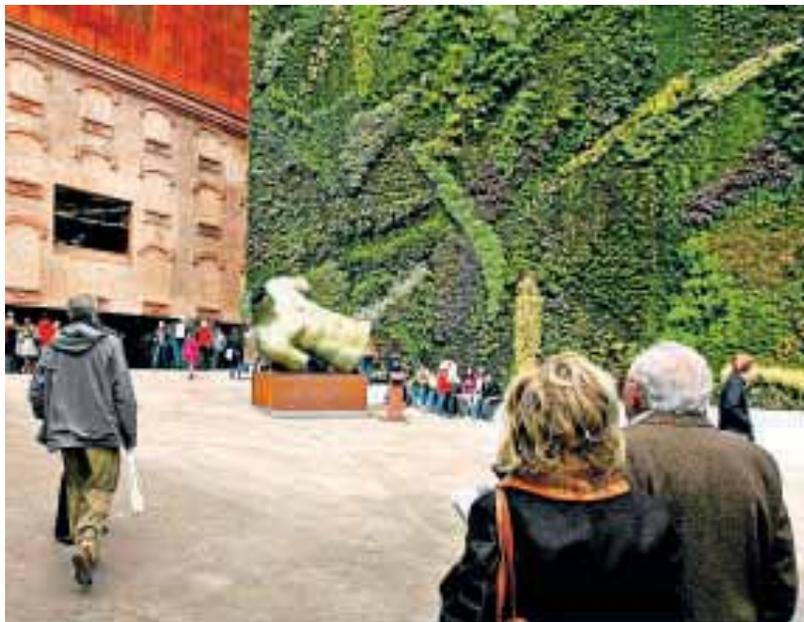
**2009**

**Athenaeum Hotel, London** Living wall installed by Patrick Blanc









PA; ALAMY; CLIVE NICHOLS; STEVEN WOOSTER; BBC; PEDRO ARMESTRE/AFP/GETTY

**Going green: clockwise from far left, Charlie Dimmock, Alan Titchmarsh and Tommy Walsh from 'Ground Force'; the tree-house at Alnwick Castle; a bird's-eye view of the Eden Project; *Verbena bonariensis*; a Patrick Blanc vertical garden in Madrid; Nineties blue walls; Tudor garden at Kenilworth; Future Gardens; Piet Oudolf at Pensthorpe, Norfolk**

