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FOR SUMMER



FIELD SYSTEM

In his modern reconstruction of a Yorkshire garden within an ancient, agricultural landscape, Tom Stuart-Smith has developed a layout that echoes the forms of the view that it commands, and underpins his characteristically fluid planting

TEXT CLARE FOSTER | PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW LAWSON

Tom Stuart-Smith is a garden designer, but above all he is a man who designs with plants. An accomplished plantsman, he has a huge knowledge of horticulture and an intuitive eye for how plants interact. He is an architect, creating complex structural landscapes that underpin his flowing planting schemes. He is an intellectual, each of his gardens imbued with complex layers of meaning and interest. Most of all he is an artist who uses plants to create living works of art that resonate with energy, colour and movement. This ability to 'paint' with plants is nowhere better demonstrated than in a garden Tom has made in Yorkshire, where he has

transformed a whole hillside into a vast and beautiful canvas of plants.

Mount St John, a 150-acre estate in the Hambleton Hills overlooking the Vale of York, is owned by businessman Chris Blundell. Chris took over the estate in 2000 and met Tom in 2003, having admired his gold-medal-winning garden at the Chelsea Flower Show in 1998. Impressed by his portfolio of work, Chris commissioned Tom to redesign the garden in front of the imposing, south-facing Georgian house, which is divided into two distinct areas with a large, formal lawn and borders directly in front of the house and a more modern-looking terrace in front of



GARDEN PLAN (ABOVE) 1 Woodland valley. 2 Formal lawn and borders. 3 Modern perennial garden. 4 Lower terrace and beech domes. 5 Walled vegetable garden. 6 Cutting garden. **OPPOSITE** The Georgian house overlooks an expanse of lawn surrounded by borders; the planting is bold and richly textured, with tall perennials such as *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination' (foreground), *Eupatorium purpureum* and yellow-flowered fennel providing height and drama





With expansive views across the Vale of York, the modern garden slopes down in a series of terraces towards the open countryside beyond. Densely planted perennials and grasses form an ever-changing tapestry of colour, reaching a peak in late summer, and maturing to rich shades of brown in autumn. Seedheads are left throughout winter to give structure, and are then cut back in early spring as new growth appears. The terraces are edged with wide coping stones which double as paths, allowing visitors to walk through the planting mass, as well as look down at the plants

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THIS PAGE At the lower end of the modern garden, a series of eleven beech domes provides a breathing space in contrast to the dense mass of plants. Beyond, the planting echoes the ancient field patterns with bands of miscanthus interspersed with tall perennials. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT In the modern garden, mounds of box are echoed in the beech domes diagonally opposite them. There is a water feature by Andrew Ewing on the top terrace. A mass of dahlias grows in the cutting garden. The walled vegetable garden supplies local restaurants

a recent extension. Adjacent to this is the walled kitchen garden, restored in a separate project and now supplying vegetables and cut flowers to local restaurants; on the other side of the house a wooded valley is also being developed. In all, the garden extends to about 10 acres.

The inescapable element that informs all parts of this garden is the view. 'The garden really is entirely about this view,' says Tom. 'You can scarcely see another house, and seem to be commanding 20 miles of land.' On a clear day you can see the towers of York Minster in the distance, and Tom, tongue firmly in cheek, likes to compare the relationship between Mount St John and York with that of the Tivoli Gardens and Rome, where the dome of St Peter's can just be glimpsed from Tivoli. But here, of course, the landscape is unmistakably and bucolically English, the emerald-green patchwork punctuated with the darker greens of trees and hedgerows in an ancient field system that dates back to medieval times. The garden is completely open to the landscape, a foreground to the view that dominates it all.

'The idea was to have a very modern garden juxtaposed with a very ancient landscape,' says Tom, 'but at the same time I felt the garden must extract something from the place in which it's situated.' To this end, he has emulated some of the patterns of the ancient field system in his planting, literally taking a chunk from an 1888 map and marking out the lines with bands of miscanthus on the lowest terrace of the modern garden. The lines are most obvious in winter, when the surrounding plants have died back. The seasonal emergence of patterns or structures not visible during the spring or summer months is an important theme in this garden, which, despite the soft layers of planting, is designed around a strict geometric grid. In winter, this grid becomes much more prominent, giving the garden a meaning as everything dies back. For Tom, the underlying grid pattern is almost a metaphor for life: 'The grid is a platonic ideal, something pure that represents how life should be, but which is always disrupted by events, by nature, by the subconscious. In the same way, in

the garden we see the irresistible force of nature breaking through the grid.'

In the modern garden, which covers an acre and a half, the slope was sliced into five large terraces divided by retaining walls of York stone. The wide coping slabs of the walls double as paths, and on one terrace, a rectangular pool, still and calm, creates a breathing point in the middle of the planting mass. Although bulbs such as daffodils, tulips and scillas play a part in spring, the bulk of the 30,000 plants are perennials and grasses, arranged artfully in naturalistic drifts and mounds and designed to come to a peak in late summer. Layers of colour and height are built up with combinations such as deep purple *Salvia nemorosa* 'Amethyst', bright pink *Dianthus carthusianorum*, pale, willowy *Echinacea pallida* and wine-coloured *Knautia macedonica*, the pinks and purples set off by clouds of acid-yellow *Euphorbia ceratocarpa* behind. The planting is dense and to a certain extent self-supporting, although according to head gardener Chris Gough, the summer rain in recent years has called for extra staking. To counteract the amorphous flow of the plants, Tom has created interesting diagonal views across the garden, with large box domes and a series of eleven clipped beeches dotted across the diagonal axis. 'I hate boring, simple axial solutions,' he says. 'Rectilinear spaces are always more interesting when viewed across the diagonal.'

With the view once again casting its spell, Tom is hoping to persuade his client to build a new belvedere at the foot of the garden to give another perspective over the valley below. 'The main garden has a more rhetorical relationship with the landscape,' he explains, 'and the belvedere would be set slightly apart from the garden, giving a simpler experience of the same view.' There is no doubt that the view from this hilltop is utterly spectacular, but is the garden subservient? Well, yes; at certain times of year, when the planting recedes, the landscape will triumph, but when that mass of plants comes into its own in late summer and into autumn, then surely it is the garden that steals the show □

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