

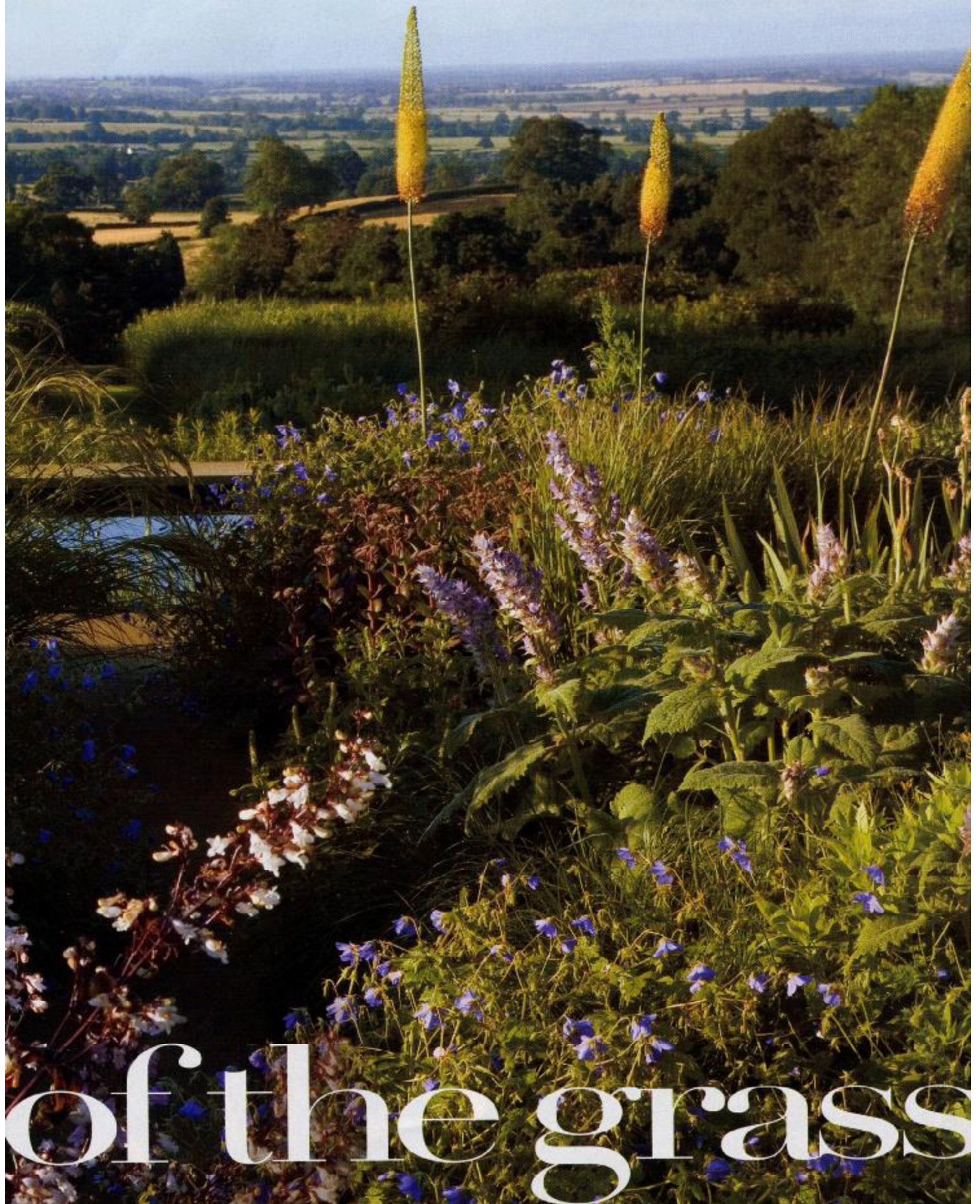
BLOOMS WITH A VIEW

Spires of saffron-yellow eremurus and rosy-hued penstemon frame the pool at Mount St. John in Yorkshire. "The design of this garden is an act of prostration in front of the view," says Stuart-Smith.

Photographed by Andrew Lawson.

splendor

*With a generous eye and a sublime palette,
landscaper Tom Stuart-Smith brings a postmodern
aesthetic to the traditional English garden.
Patrick Kinmonth meets a horticultural wizard.*



of the grass

THE NATURALIST

Stuart-Smith, surrounded by yellow bird's-foot trefoil and purple knapweed in his garden in Hertfordshire.

This page and following pages photographed by Christopher Sturman.
Sittings Editor: Miranda Brooks.

“There’s a movement toward gardens that do not dictate a single route through their design, but always leave more to discover”



To walk through Tom Stuart-Smith's gardens, for all but a few, is not to see them as he does. Being unusually tall, he always has a bird's-eye view, but with his hawkish good looks an elegant bird of prey would be typecasting for the bird in question. In any case, his taste is for things seen from above, and to share his vision we climb up to the roof of a gray stone house, Mount St. John in Yorkshire, where he has recently been commissioned to redesign a garden on a grand scale. The garden spreads below us like a hallucination, a carpet of perennial plants whose complex composition is drawn from the landscape beyond, the vale of York in the north of England. Today the view is so long that it is going Wedgwood blue at the horizon, punctuated by hedges and the green domes of oak and beech.

At his own house, still in the country but near enough to his London studio to make his life as one of Britain's busiest garden designers possible, the manner is restrained—a sort of sketchbook for and reminder of jobs past, future, and present. Home also serves as a retreat for friends and family, a clan that extends to include his favorite plants. The Stuart-Smiths are planted in Hertfordshire as closely as one of Tom's schemes—his parents, brother, and sister all live on the family estate—and Tom's garden is built around the old farm. "My garden there is not a calling card for me as a designer," he says. "It's a private place where Sue, my wife, and I garden together." Family (including their three children) and plants alike flourish in the network of divisions, finding their place among the formal clipped hedges of hornbeam and beech and architectural columns of Irish yew that he uses to frame his masterly plantings of perennials. "I like to see the grid fill, burgeon, and overflow with biomass," he says.

Stuart-Smith's work is not for the vertically challenged. If you were to draw his borders (which he does himself, of course—beautifully), your pencil would busily make vertical marks, a floating mass of accents in a pure red persicaria, a favorite Japanese grass "like a hairdo," or the wiry masses of phlomis, echinaceas, and what he calls "screaming-yellow rudbeckias" that punctuate Mount St. John's plantings like exclamation points. "It's quite easy to make an eyebrow-raising garden of perennials in a season, and Mount St. John proves it," he says as we leave the roof. "Not a plant in the new garden has been there for more than a year."

I wonder if the tall plants are (as I have heard from other designers) a wish to re-create the impact of the first gardens he loved as a child, when everything seemed bigger. In his case the memory is of towering tomato plants, "their red fruit ready to explode all over our T-shirts." But if anything, the garden at Mount



PATH OF GLORY
An allée of box hedges leads to an eruption of *Stipa gigantea* in his garden.

St. John, despite its scale (vast), is an exercise in miniaturization. "The design of this garden is an act of prostration in front of the view," Stuart-Smith says. "The first time I came here, I could see for 60 miles over a wonderful pattern of hedges with bumpy oaks and ashes coming out of them. It seemed to me that the garden should be some kind of progressive abstraction and formalization of what you were seeing beyond. The topiary in the garden is deliberately round-topped to echo the shapes of mature trees in the wider landscape. If I had made them spiky, their effect would be alienating rather than making the connection I wanted." Such ideas may seem romantically intellectual, but they add an emotional undertow that sustains the design of a garden.

One of the most exhausted phrases in contemporary garden design must surely be "a sense of place," tossed around to add pedigree to an otherwise conventional piece of work. But in Stuart Smith's gardens it is there in spades: His instincts are historically trained through years of working on old gardens around old houses. But his is a very modern exercise in nostalgia, more related to Color Field painting than to classic garden formality. "The juxtaposition of opposites is what interests me in art," he

says. "The music I like always has that tension—a tension between the terrible and the beautiful that seeks not to be bland." Looking over the parapet, I suddenly see the plantings below as an open score, where the notation is plants and themes have been picked out from the wider landscape, creating a fugue whose conclusion is a flash from the medieval towers of York Minster, 30 miles away.

"There is formalized meadow planting near the edge of the garden in which I take the nineteenth-century field pattern that you see in the view and literally transpose it," he says. "It is

picked out in lines of grasses." The result is a contemporary take on the parterres that characterized the European traditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whereas those gardens announced their owners' dominance of nature, a modern Stuart-Smith garden is more likely to celebrate the best that time has left in a place—the bequest of an old wall, or an ancient tree.

And then there is Stuart-Smith's use of color. The pointillist fields of the Chelsea gardens that made his name have evolved into ever-more-daring juxtapositions, using fewer, carefully chosen plants in massed volumes. "Just as your tastes mature and you like stronger food," he notes, "you migrate through color territories as you grow older. Now I like a tang in the palette. I like gradients and tend to put the strongest color nearest to the house. At home I have a meadow full of bird's-foot trefoil and knapweed—strong acid-yellow and violent purple—and that has more or less dictated the colors in the whole garden. You see intense colors in nature, which have taught me to be bolder."

Stuart-Smith has progressed from late-Monet blue-shadowed plantings in his own garden to a postmodern intensity: more Fauve than mauve. "With a mass (continued on page 427)



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ONWARD AND UPWARD

Staggering heights of perennials lead to hornbeam and beech hedges in the garden of Stuart-Smith's home. "I like to see the grid fill, burgeon, and overflow with biomass," he says.

