

A question of boundaries

Making a seamless transition from the garden to the landscape beyond involves manipulating plants, textures and space, says **Tom Stuart-Smith**



HAROLD HARRIS



ABOVE Busier planting near the house leads to green spaces then meadowland. **BELOW** Tender plants, like *Salvia patens*, stay close to the house.

We are all conditioned by our environment, and I think that if I had spent the past fifteen years gardening in north London, the Scottish highlands or the Marlborough Downs, rather than five miles north of Watford, I would approach things differently from the way I do. Much of my garden making at home has been to do with relating the abstract structure of the garden to the little morsel of Hertfordshire countryside that surrounds me.

TOM STUART-SMITH

Most gardens are circumscribed by boundaries; they become outdoor sitting rooms, and further subdivision would be like putting a screen between the television

and the sofa. At the other end of the spectrum there are gardens where any sense of a boundary is undesirable - the landscape never stops flowing.

The great compositions of Capability Brown fall into this category, Petworth in Sussex being a supreme example. Not so much as a strand of wire separates the house from the thousand acres of park. On a smaller scale I can see the same being the case for a woodland garden - where any division between the cultivated area and the natural woodland should be seamless.

At The Barn, when I started colonising the windy void twelve years ago, I wanted to create a definite formal ▶



DONALD WOOD



ABOVE, TOP CENTRE AND FAR RIGHT Plants that have a pale natural look, such as white *Veronicastrum virginicum*, pink *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Atrosanguinea' and creamy *Campanula alliariifolia*, are all perfect for the more distant reaches of the garden. **BOTTOM CENTRE** Tender, silvery leaved *Melanthus major* needs to be tucked alongside the house.

outline to the garden so that its composition became a kind of architectural extension of the barn and its courtyard. All the horticulture should be contained within the perimeter of hedges, with only trees and wildflowers beyond. Thirteen years on, I have still just managed to resist the temptation to spill out beyond the boundaries. Too often a wonderful garden is spoilt by an irrepressible desire to grow yet more plants.

As the garden here has developed, I have become more particular about what plants are aesthetically appropriate for different areas. The closer to the house the more exoticism is allowed. Around the building I use a few tender plants such as *Salvia patens*, *Dahlia* 'Dark Desire', *Melanthus major* - but I wouldn't use these in the natural plantings further away.

In the more distant reaches of the garden I start to use many more native plants, such as dusky cranesbills, scabious, teasel and wild carrot, and exotics that have a more delicate, natural look to them, like the paler varieties of *Persicaria amplexicaulis*, *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Album', *Campanula alliariifolia* and, one of my favourite smaller grasses, the plain green *Hakonechloa macra*. In this way, there begins to be a gradient of naturalness running through the garden from the highly cultivated to the semi-wild.

Another gradient follows this. Close to the house I grow clematis up hazel teepees and take endless trouble in spring to weave cat's cradles from hazel, birch and beech twigs. The further away from the house, the

less I want to see these overt signs of husbandry. In the wilder plantings I don't want to be staking at all.

Perhaps even more important than these textural gradients are the spatial variations within the garden. The manipulation of space is perhaps the greatest tool of the garden maker, and where there is the opportunity to move through different spaces in a garden, then one can play on the imagination like an accordion, squeezing into crevices then expanding into wide prospects.

At The Barn, overriding this variety within the overall composition, I have created a gradient of density across the garden. The most intimate and enclosed areas

around the house and on the south side of the garden give way to empty boxes, enclosing lawns, and then to the wide expanse of meadow. You feel propelled out into the landscape from the congestion in the

midst of it all to the open areas beyond.

Over the years I have often been tempted to fill the empty spaces with yet more plants, but fortunately the footballing lobby (aged sixteen, fourteen and eleven) has always prevailed. Otherwise I might have dammed up the natural flow of space from the crowded, brimming heart of the garden through the empty boxes and out into the open meadow. ■

Five times Chelsea gold medal winner Tom Stuart-Smith has designed gardens for RHS Rosemoor, Devon and for HM The Queen at Windsor. He lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and three children.

Manipulation of space is the greatest tool of the garden maker