



PAULANNI HARRIS

DESIGN EYE

# Wind assisted style

Tom Stuart-Smith falls for some airy aristocrats



GILJUNIKWA HAYTE



MAIRE BOLTON

Airy plants have a special place in the contemporary garden. Not the neat hummocks of the rock garden but the delicate grassland and woodland flowers that move in every breeze and seem to inject space into every planting. Ragged robin, cow parsley and tufted hair grass are the sort of familiar prototypes that many of these plants relate to.

Piet and Anja Oudolf have done more than anybody to bring many of these plants to our attention, and a visit to their nursery in Hummelo in the Netherlands is an exercise in horticultural and mental air entrainment.

In September this year a number of unusual plants there caught my eye - plants that haven't quite caught on here yet, including number of beautiful and unusual grasses. Piet is an admirer of *Sporobolus heterolepis*, only eighteen inches high and with many of the best qualities of fescues without their generally depressing dumpiness. It is one of those plants you cannot walk past without giving it a stroke - partly because of the sweet and unplaceable scent that it gives off.

Pennisetums are wonderful for their long display of hanging, hairy caterpillar flower heads, but many are not entirely hardy. One I have admired is *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Cassian's Choice', which seems to have staying power in cold Dutch winters; whether it will cope with British winter sog remains to be seen.

**ABOVE LEFT** *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Cassian's Choice'. **ABOVE RIGHT** *Panicum virgatum* 'Cloud Nine'. **BELOW** *Sanguisorba officinalis* 'Arnhem'.

On the grandest scale I am especially taken by *Panicum virgatum* 'Cloud Nine'. Almost all varieties of *Panicum virgatum* are wonderful things. Two years ago I came back from my first trip to the Oudolfs clutching a plant of *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah', arguably the most arresting grass in the garden from August to October, burnished red and a flower head like the most delicate starburst. 'Cloud Nine' is on a different scale altogether, arching to six or seven feet with the grace of the smaller panicums. It makes most of the miscanthus varieties look solid and coarse by comparison.

*Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent' is fabulously graceful, moving in the slightest breeze. 'Fontäne' is more broody, with the seeds darkening almost black. It is very floppy in its first year and then decides it had better stand up properly. Plant it next to something lower and solid looking like *Echinacea purpurea* 'White Swan' or even *Eryngium agavifolium*.

Many flowering plants can fulfil the same aerating role. I first saw the Carthusian pink, *Dianthus carthusianorum*, growing through an abandoned grass tennis court near Lucca in Tuscany, so it is pretty tolerant of poor conditions. The bright cerise flowers, half an inch across, are held up by such thin stems that they seem to float disembodied from any support. I mix it up with salvias, sedums, *Stipa calamagrostis* and low asters.



GARDEN WORKS IMAGES



*Cephalaria dipsacoides* operates at a higher level. It doesn't give you quite the same flower power as *Cephalaria gigantea*, but it is much more drought tolerant and has a delicate but resilient architecture that its cousin lacks. I have it in the garden here with *Stipa gigantea* and *Verbena bonariensis* (all supplying lots of air) wafting about like countesses with cigarette holders over a more solid ground of salvias, *Pblomis russeliana* and *Amsonia* var. *salicifolia*.

In another part of the garden where there is more moisture, I grow the early flowering form of salad burnet, *Sanguisorba officinalis* 'Arnhem'. This carries little buttons of deep red on six foot branching, wiry stems. With me, it then dries out and I cut it to the ground in late July. By planting it through a mass of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberspinne' no embarrassing baldness is left. Many of the tall sanguisorbas are equally graceful and airy in white and pink. They manage to look deeply aristocratic and at the same time only once removed from something you might find in a damp hedge. I like that.

If you were to fill the whole garden with these airy beauties, shifting in every puff on wind, the place will soon be like a mass of tangled wire and lacking in any kind of structure. They need to be mixed up with sentinel plants such as eremurus, onopordum and even foxgloves, and then they do need space between them to be effective - spaces filled with more modest performers and the occasional bit of beef. Here, I'm thinking of dense, clumpy things like *Phytolacca virginiana*, phloxes, asters, *Campanula*

*lactiflora* and *Persicaria polymorpha*. Plants that finally bring the eye to rest. Contrast is everything. ■

Five times Chelsea gold medal winner Tom Stuart-Smith has designed gardens for RHS Rosemoor, Devon, and for the Queen at Windsor. He lives in Hertfordshire.

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**ABOVE** The graceful waving seedheads of *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent'. **LEFT** The deep cerise flowers of *Dianthus carthusianorum*, the Carthusian pink, seem to float on wiry stems above surrounding plants.