



# A PARALLEL EDEN

Tom Stuart-Smith is convinced that the trend towards natural planting fulfils a basic human need and so will endure



I was asked recently if the current craze for naturalistic planting isn't just a passing fad. In ten years' time, will we be shaking our heads and wondering how it ever caught on, as we chuck our clumps of time expired miscanthus on the compost heap? I, for one, don't think so. It seems to me that this planting responds to a desire many of us share, to connect with nature at a deeper level. Consequently, we want our garden plants to represent a more idealised form of wildness than can be produced by a straightjacketed parade of wonderblooms.

Much of this effect is created by using plants that have a delicate form and structure not so far removed from familiar native plants. Grasses are central to this; they dominate our landscape, and it makes sense that if we want our garden plantings to emulate nature in some way, our gardens should contain them in fair proportion. Many of the varieties we use have

some of the qualities of native grasses, but are better behaved, with a longer season of beauty.

For example, the brownish dead flowerheads and straw stems of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' are similar in spirit to many other dead native grasses, but just bigger and better. They are always one of the most remarkable objects in my garden through winter.

Other grasses that make up the backbone of the garden are the smaller miscanthus varieties, such as *M. sinensis* 'Kleine Silberspinne' and *M.s.* 'Yakushima Dwarf', which can be mixed up with perennials, such as sanguisorbas, veronicastrums, polygonums and filipendulas, to create something that is reminiscent of the damp uncut meadow you find along rivers, such as the Test in Hampshire. If you were to add kniphofias and crocosmias, the effect would be very different - it would take on an exotic whiff disconnecting it from the natural ideal.

Planting design can draw on the landscape

in other ways. The garden I made for Laurent-Perrier at the 2003 Chelsea Flower Show was intended to evoke the proportions of a hazel coppice underplanted with a carpet of spring flowers. Even though I chose *Cornus kousa* instead of hazel and used all manner of exotic woodland flowers underneath, I think it still had the scale of the original model.

As our natural landscapes and habitats become fewer and more truncated, we try increasingly to create a parallel Eden that in some way reflects the scale, content and diversity of these rapidly vanishing havens. Possibly, this is a vein that we have been exploring since Humphry Repton's time in the early 19th century. But, today, there is a greater urgency; that clump of wood anemones seems all the more poignantly beautiful by being half buried in builders' rubbish. Gardening can be our small act of homage to what remains of the beauty and diversity of our native landscape.