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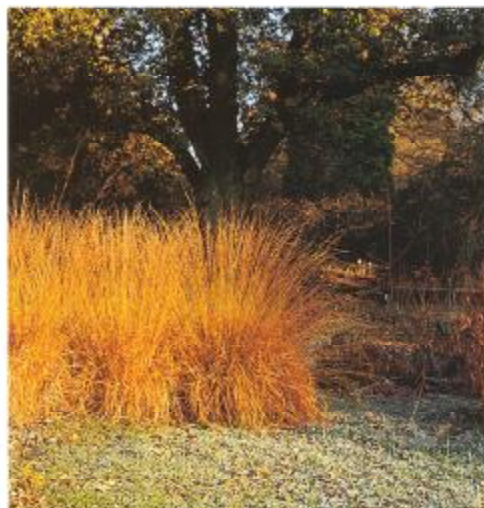
Wanted: dead or alive

Tom Stuart-Smith finds a strange beauty in fading plants

As winter's chilly embrace beckons, the balance in the garden and landscape has changed. We now see more bark and branch, more underlying structure and less froth. At home, the hedges loom large. They become like the walls of rooms where the party is over and the space is now populated with more or less graceful decay.

I wander from one space to another to see who is still up for a last dance - or who, even if they are now well and truly dead - has died in style; Aunt Veronicastrum, who almost expired of thirst after a memorably hot summer, but will still be as erect in February as when she was in full flower; and Uncle Phlomis (*russeliana*) who is perhaps even more striking dead than alive.

I become more impressed by prairie echinaceas every year. *E. purpurea* is the star of the garden from August on, and even in December the tangle of spiky seedheads is handsome - if it hasn't been blown to bits by a gale. Both *Echinacea pallida* and *E. angustifolia* are plants in a truly Wildean mode - managing to look elegantly exhausted by life but, alas, when death does come - no



GARDEN WORLD IMAGES

TOP LEFT Teasels stand like totem poles in a Dan Pearson Chelsea garden. **TOP RIGHT** *Phlomis russeliana* flaunts a slim elegant frame. **ABOVE** With grasses such as *stipa* it is the more the merrier.

doubt as a welcome relief - they don't look half as distinguished in their moribund state as their lustier cousin, who remains impressively stout by comparison.

The monardas are other Americans who do an even better death dance, but on my dry gravelly soil they get so covered in mildew in summer that not even their insectivorous looking splendour in winter can make up for it.

The great eighteenth century architect William Kent was alleged to have carefully retained dead trees in Kensington Gardens for picturesque effect. I can imagine up to the minute garden designers inserting dead monardas into plant beds just for their winter skeletons. This would be silly. But I remember Dan Pearson's stylish roof garden for the Chelsea Flower Show in 1996 where dead teasels planted through a low matrix of hummocks and tussocks stood like proud, sculptural totems.

The larger sedums are unbeatable for winter effect. *S. telephium* 'Matrona' and *S. 'Herbtsfreude'* are the best for me, as their colour gradually changes over winter. Their dying tones are worthy of Tintoretto, in darkest rust and maroon. These are plants that I almost prefer



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ABOVE Handsome American prairie coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*. **RIGHT** Dramatically frosted *Sedum 'Herbstfreude'* is unbeatable. **BELOW** Skeleton seedheads of *Monarda 'Beauty of Cobham'*. **BELOW RIGHT** A mingling of veronicastrum and monarda corpses may stand stiff and fine all through to February.



ANDREW LAMSON



GILL HOWARD REE

dead to alive - except when I come to remove them on a wet March day and discover stems covered in putrid slime.

Almost all the grass family are worth having for their corpses alone, and stipas are probably the best. *Stipa gigantea* fills the garden with air and movement from June onwards. I like it best when mixed with similarly airy plants such as *Eryngium x tripartitum*, *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Cephalaria dipsacoides* and common fennel. All of these hang about into winter elegantly.

The smaller stipas are as good in their own way; *Stipa cala-magrostis* and *Stipa arundinacea* look fine mixed up with sedums and the odd thistle and teasel right into February. *Stipa brachytricha* (now *Calamagrostis brachytricha*) is also good, having straw coloured leaves into December and delicately fluffy seedheads that fall apart by January.

Moving up a peg or two, we come to miscanthus, the smart stalwart of jumbo sized grasses. I have now designed several areas - some around swimming pools - where the only planting has been of this wonderful grass. From June until March, nine months later, when they are cut down with a hedge cutter, they look magnificent.

The more the better. In one garden I used about four thousand *M. sinensis* 'Malepartus': one great space and then a series of narrow grass paths that the children could run down with the great leaves arching over their heads. In summer, the swimming pool looks as though it is set in a sugar cane plantation. It probably looks its best in September when in full flower, but is also pretty impressive in November and December when the whole thing looks like a giant, rustling wintry reed bed.

Most varieties of miscanthus really do stand up better than other mainstream grasses. At one Norfolk wholesale nursery *Miscanthus sacchariflorus* is used as a nine foot windbreak.

If you do decide to have yourself a miscanthus plantation, make sure you get all the plants from one source. On a number of embarrassing occasions I have been supplied mixed batches, and this only becomes apparent after mid-summer, as they begin to behave in different ways. There are now 73 cultivars of *Miscanthus sinensis* listed in the *RHS Plant Finder* and so lots of room for confusion. A grand mono-cultural block of miscanthus makes a wonderful contrast to more complex herbaceous planting. It is elemental, simple and yet full of endless variety and movement. ■



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