



MARTIN MARRAS

# On the grand scale

Tom Stuart-Smith admits to a weakness for the giants of the plant world

I have had a thing about big plants ever since I can remember. When I was small (although I never seem to have been that small), my brothers, sisters and I were regularly sent down to pick fruit or vegetables in the market garden run by my mother. I liked picking the tomatoes, because of their heady smell, viscid foliage and the sensation of being enveloped in a jungle where large red fruits hung down waiting to explode across T-shirts. If sometimes we are searching to create some lost Eden in our grown up gardens, then perhaps I have been trying to recreate the spatial memory of those tomato houses using giant herbaceous plants.

Descriptions of large plants are often followed by the dreary suffix 'an excellent subject for the back of the border'. But many of these plants are so dramatic and beautiful that they should be at the front, or in the middle, or all over the place, not staged up like some vast choir in the Royal Albert Hall with the grunting basses pinned to the back wall.

There is something thrilling about the irrepressible eruption of growth exhibited by these giants, that cannot be matched by woody plants. It really is a case of 0-60 in four seconds. Here is a list of ten favourites. I have left out anything too delicate - such as the thalictrums - because you don't get the very visible burst of biomass which is so dramatic.

So perhaps we should start with two of the biggest, fastest and greyest: *Verbascum bombyciferum* and *Onopordum acanthium*. Both of these reach ten feet on my sandy, gravelly soil and, in June, their grey felted foliage, one smooth and the other spiky, add intense drama to the garden. They have the additional quality



JONATHAN BUCKLEY

**ABOVE** Proving big is beautiful, giant onopordums tower over Californian poppies in Sarah Raven's garden at Perch Hill. **LEFT** *Verbascum phlomoides* 'Spica' is hard to find but worth the search for its creamy flowers; *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder' finishes off the season in style.

of being biennial, so seedlings can pop up anywhere. Each year I transplant some to carefully chosen positions, but they never grow as tall as the self-set ones.

The verbascum has yellow flowers, which I like, but I know some don't, so there is a good creamy variety with less felted leaves, called *Verbascum phlomoides* 'Spica'. It is quite hard to find, but if it likes you it is there forever, very beautiful indeed, as long as the mullein moth - that also likes it - doesn't get there first.

The disadvantage of these two is that once they have done their stuff, they produce huge amounts of seed and die - so by the middle of August you may find yourself in a gloomy, spiky rustling graveyard.

All the others in my list are true perennials, so don't adopt quite such a live-fast-die-young strategy. The earliest to flower is *Crambe cordifolia*, often described as having a flower like a giant gypsophila - but this makes you think of something pretty and diminutive, which crambe is not. In good free draining soil and sun a flower spike can be eight foot high and six foot across, ▶



VIC JOHNSTONE



DILWARK BOLTON



ANDREW LAWRENCE



ANDREW LAWRENCE



GRACYNNE EDELMAN

**ABOVE, FROM LEFT** *Helianthus salicifolius* has magnificent foliage; well behaved *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Lavendelturm'; stylish *Verbena hastata* 'Rosea'. **BELOW, FROM LEFT** Joe Pye weed, *Eupatorium purpureum* 'Atropurpureum'; the great frothy flowerheads of *Crambe cordifolia*; sometimes invasive *Macleaya cordata*; *Silphium perfoliatum* is another either loved or hated; *Onopordum acanthium* regularly reaches ten foot.

on which there are thousands of flowers. The smell is not subtle, but at the height of the roses season when all is so polite and charming I don't mind a bit of rough.

Next, a little clutch of plants that have great presence from beginning to end. *Macleaya*, *veronicastrum* and *silphium*. Of these, the *veronicastrum* are perhaps the best behaved. In spring the foliage is satisfyingly solid and cannabis-like; in the case of *V* 'Fascination', slightly flushed purple. As they come into flower the clumps open out and become airy and delicate. The tallest (at seven foot) for me are 'Fascination' (named for its occasionally fasciated stems) and 'Lavendelturm' - palest lilac. 'Temptation' and 'Spring Dew' are slightly smaller and out of the giant category. They all look good through the winter, with their spiky seedheads standing up well.

The *macleayas* are a wondrous enigma, members of the poppy family which couldn't look less like poppies with their fawny plumes of flower, bleeding kipper yellow when the stems are cut, and leaves so beautiful in outline that you feel the medieval artist Dürer would have drawn them had he known them; consistently one of the most beautiful things in the garden from May to September. Some people think they are a menace, but they've never menaced me.

With *silphiums* I'm on more dangerous ground. The great Graham Stuart Thomas in his book *Perennial Garden Plants* dismisses one of my favourites thus: '*Silphium perfoliatum* is occasionally seen and reaches 1.8m (6ft) in height, but I should not want it in my

garden'. I love the way he makes it sound like a Millwall fan with eight pints of Special Brew inside him.

Actually its worse than that; *Silphium perfoliatum* gets to eight foot, at least in my garden, and does tend to expand a little (not on account of the Special Brew), but it's an admirable thing. In New England I've seen it grown in semi-shade and a resplendent ten foot tall. The leaves arranged around the stem, like teasel, collect little pots of water after rain, and the flowers pop out of the leaf axils like little gobstoppers before the tight green calyx peels back to reveal a succession of chirpy yellow daisies for six weeks in late summer.

The prairie dock, *S. terebinthinaceum*, is even taller; its flowers reach up twelve foot on wiry, wavy stems way above the three foot horseradish leaves. I've only got babies in my garden and am waiting impatiently.

Flowering after these rougher sorts are two aristocrats of the giant garden: the willow leaved sunflower, *Helianthus salicifolius*, and *Eupatorium purpureum* 'Atropurpureum'. The sunflower is a magnificent foliage plant - getting up to ten feet and the only one on my list which regularly needs staking. Its foliage seems to

## There is something thrilling about the eruption of growth

combine the exotic and familiar in perfect measure. I planted large groups of it against the castle for the Queen's Jubilee Garden at Windsor.

In the first season it exceeded my expectations, grew to twelve feet and blocked the views from first floor windows. It looks wonderful planted with the *eupatorium*, which is a very upmarket Joe Pye weed, infused with purple all over and topped with handsome broad panicles of soft rosy purple from August onwards. In photos it tends to look a deep rich purple, which is a lie. The real thing is quite nice enough anyway. These two are a wonderful way to finish off the season in style and are a great sight when grown with a large *miscanthus*, and perhaps bit of *Verbena bastata* 'Rosea' thrown in for good measure. ■

See our special giant plant offer on page 27.



JONATHAN BUCKLEY



GR. CLARE DAVIS



JONATHAN BUCKLEY



GR. LIBBY PAVA



JONATHAN BUCKLEY