

## gardens

29

**STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN**  
SNOWSHILL MANOR EVOKES THE SPIRIT OF TUSCANY

30

**PAGAN HEART**  
KATHERINE SWIFT FEELS THE BURN

**SHOCK OF THE NEW**  
GREAT DIXTER NEVER STANDS STILL

31

**SOWING CIRCLE**  
LIZZIE FAIRIE GOES BACK TO SCHOOL

**KITCHEN GARDEN**  
ORDER YOUR SEEDS NOW

33

**GARDENS TO VISIT**  
ORCHARDS AND OAKS, WALKS AND WATERCOURSES

**Tapestry:**  
prairie path through a variety of grasses, including this tall grass, at Hermannshof public gardens

## GARDENS OF INSPIRATION HERMANNSHOF, WEINHEIM

CASSIAN SCHMIDT



# Magic carpet ride

Startling, challenging, amusing ... leading designers **Tom Stuart-Smith, Mary Keen and Christopher Bradley-Hole** describe a garden that has helped to shape their creative vision

Weinheim is a prosperous, rather sleepy, town near Frankfurt, with several picturesque castles clinging to rocky outcrops. Charming, certainly, but cutting edge? Surprisingly, yes, if you walk two minutes south of the town square to Hermannshof public garden, where the curator, Cassian Schmidt, has developed extraordinary experimental plantings using American prairie plants.

In the past ten years, large-scale perennial plantings have become the rage. "Prairie planting" is now used as a label for just about any meadow-like expanse of perennials where the overall effect is more important than any individual plant. But many of these new plantings, however wonderful they may be, are quite different from those that use true prairie species. A trip to Hermannshof in September made me appreciate the startling difference between the two.

The entrance to the garden is unexceptional — some fine trees and shrubs, but nothing to

prepare you for the virtuoso display of naturalism in the heart of the garden. For here, stretching over about an acre, is the most beautiful colourful and truly naturalistic herbaceous planting I have ever seen, formed by three contrasting areas of reconstructed prairie planting using species from the American Mid-West exclusively. The first area we came across is the short grass prairie, never more than knee high and planted with species from dry places such as western Missouri and North Dakota. *Artemisia*, *penstemon*, *Rudbeckia missouriensis* and low grasses thrive in almost pure mineral soil. The effect is like an intricate multicoloured tapestry, even in late September.

More dramatic, and more suited to British gardens, is the dry-mesic prairie (somewhere in between the short and the tall). This is a waist-high profusion of subtle texture and colour with a season of beauty extending from June through

**Continued on page 29**

**Continued from page 27**

to winter, reaching its prime in mid-August. Schmidt has planted the area on a series of matrices, comprising patterns of up to 15 species. Each matrix is made up of about 40 per cent grasses and 60 per cent perennials (or forbs, if we are really going to speak the language). The low clumpy tufts of prairie dropseed grass (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) are mixed with light and airy *Echinacea pallida*, and dark rust red *Ratibida columnifera*. Clumps of *Aster oblongifolius* and *Penstemon digitalis* occupy the middle ground, as does *Monarda menthifolia*, a bullet-proof, mildew-resistant species. The overall effect is an effortless, sweeping naturalism.

The third prairie plot in the garden is the tall grass prairie planted in a glade of young flowering dogwoods. The planting includes bold plants such as the 3m (10ft) compass plant *Silphium laciniatum*, which aligns its deeply cut leaves with the sun; *Andropogon* grass; *vernonia*; and golden rods. A narrow Native American-style path is cut through the planting. For a moment I felt like the last of the Comanche: the grasses tickled my ears and some of the taller flowers arched over my head.

On the far side of the garden, beyond herbaceous borders, annual beds and swaths of asters, is a contrasting area of steppe planting, based on the European equivalent of the prairie. Made up of sedums, achilleas, stipas, salvias, this has a more familiar look. A wonderful sight in June, maybe, but at the end of September it is a graveyard of brown stem and dried husk. The contrast with the prairie could not be more marked. The key to this contrast lies in the ecology. The prairies were managed for tens of thousands of years by the Native Americans through regular burning. At the Hermannshof, to mimic this system and control slugs and weeds, the prairie is mowed down to the ground with a strimmer in spring and then burnt with gas flame throwers. For a few weeks the dark mulch of mineral lava is visible, but then the spring bulbs start coming through and by the end of March it looks much like any other herbaceous planting.

The prairie is low maintenance. At Hermannshof all the plantings in the garden are rated according to how many minutes each year they take to maintain. The planting requires a different set of skills from traditional herbaceous border management, but offers the possibility of covering more than ten times the area in the same time. If the results are even half as lovely as the Hermannshof then I am all for it — and my two young sons are looking forward to the flame thrower bit.

**TOM STUART-SMITH**

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