

With sculpture as the focal point, thriving alliums and a lime-green froth of *Alchemilla mollis* soften the formality of the rose garden.

# *Planting Masterclass*

In an extract from her book, *In Nature's Slipstream*, Carol Bruce, whose garden at Old Bladbean Stud is renowned for its long-season displays, demonstrates how to extend the flowering season of your own garden

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS CAROL BRUCE



I conceived of each area of the garden here as a fully formed place, with plants represented by texture, colour, shape and size, long before I decided which real-life plants would be able to take on these roles. My approach has much to offer when attempting to improve an existing garden too, and I share below a step-by-step method first formulated for a local horticultural society. It combines this approach, my plant-choosing method and the successional planting technique into a system for extending the flowering season in an existing garden.

### LEARNING TO OBSERVE

First of all, practise observing your environment in abstract terms rather than looking to identify the individual objects within it. This means deliberately focusing on the lines, angles, textures, colours, shapes, sizes, arrangements and patterns that you are seeing around you. The goal is to become attuned to the sensory qualities of your surroundings and to become comfortable with wilfully ignoring the urge to know what things are. Practise observing things purely in these abstract terms until you can switch into this mode with ease. As I was working from scratch I did this during walks in the surrounding countryside, but your own garden is probably the most sensible place to start.

**Above left** Carol Bruce, owner and creator of the award-winning garden at Old Bladbean Stud.

**Above right** Just inches from a gravel drive, geraniums, alliums, delphiniums and roses merge to form a fairytale landscape of flowers.

### STEP ONE: observe your garden on all of its good days

Once you can scrutinise your surroundings without feeling the need to identify anything, the first step is to make a record of your garden's good days for a whole year. Again, focus only on the abstract – the shapes, colours, textures and so on.

Ignore your garden on its bad days: the motivation to make improvements might come from asking "What's wrong with the garden today?" but the solutions are going to be generated by asking "What's right with the garden today?" when it is looking its best. This record of your garden's good days will give you existing fixed points in a plan that will blend them into a more continuous sequence across time on the ground. The table on page 162 illustrates this using a simple example, but you can put as much detail into it as you like and even repeat the process year after year to monitor and make adjustments to your garden over time.

### STEP TWO: turning the good days into a continuous sequence

The second step is to decide where and when you'd like to repeat your favourite effects. Make a 'consider adding' column to your chart and work through it deciding where and when you'd like to see each effect reappear in your garden during the growing season.



Staggered lines of evenly spaced Irish yew, obelisks and box balls give form and structure to the borders.



In the rose garden, enticing paths wind through self-sowing populations of perennial species that flower in succession across the growing season.



Your aim is to blend your highlight snapshots into a more continuous display across your garden and across time. Cross-check that your additions will work with your existing highlights list to avoid adding anything that might upset the good days, and double-check your new additions will work well with each other at their peak times of year. As a by-product of this process, anything that isn't pulling its weight will be nudged out of your garden to make way for your new additions. The table on page 162 illustrates this using a simple example, but again you can work in as much detail as you like, depending on how much change you want to make on the ground.

**Above** Trained over metal domes, old roses *Henri Martin* (on the left) and *Gypsy Boy* grow as sturdy mounds smothered in flowers.

Stick to working with abstract characteristics rather than identities, and don't be tempted to think about which plant might perform each role or even if such a plant exists: this part of the process is akin to writing the script, but not casting the actors. Turning a blind eye to possible candidates you are familiar with helps you to edge closer to your ideal rather than choosing the best fit from the knowledge you already have. We will return to reality in the next step, once all artistic decisions have been made.

### **STEP THREE: identifying the plants**

When you have finished your 'consider adding' column, you will have a detailed plan for what



## Extend your display through the year

STEP 1 EXAMPLE Already got and love:	STEP 2 EXAMPLE Consider adding:	STEP 3 EXAMPLE Suitable plants for the role:
Low pink mound in June on the left of the front path	Low pink mound in September on the right of the front path	Sedum ( <i>Hylotelephium cauticola</i> )
Tall blue spikes in July by the beech hedge	Tall blue spikes in September by the privet hedge	<i>Acontium carmichaelii</i> ☑️ <i>Arendsii</i> ☑️
White sprays over the shed in July	White sprays over the garage in May and June	<i>Hydrangea petiolaris</i>
Tall blue billows in June and July to the right of the lawn	Tall blue billows in September or October to the left of the lawn	<i>Symphytotrichum</i> ☑️Little Carlow☑️
Sprawling white foam under the arbour in June	Sprawling white foam in front of the arbour in August	<i>Agapanthus</i> ☑️Headbourne White☑️

to add and where, to amplify and extend all your favourite effects in your garden without altering its character or compromising your personal taste, and all without needing to know the name of a single new plant. You have effectively been working with hypothetical plant descriptions instead of real plant names, and to convert one to the other we need a tool that can find the best fit for a string of descriptive terms: an internet search engine. A plant's name and its description are just like an equation, and you already have the description side. A search engine will provide the name side for you by finding plants that match your description.

I use Google's image search out of habit, but no doubt other search engines would be equally effective. Type in your hypothetical plant's description as the search term, such as "vine with tiny white flowers in June", and Google's image search will show photographs of all the plants it can find that are described as such. A click on the image of a promising candidate usually reveals the plant's name, and then you can research its suitability for your site in the usual way before adding each choice to your chart.

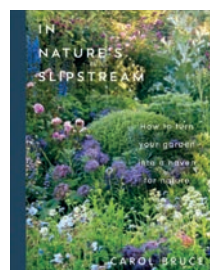
If you can't find anything suitable from the search results, then get into the shoes of a person who might post the image onto the internet and rephrase your search terms accordingly, or try adjusting

**Above left** The beds are a fascinating mixture of the original planting and self-sown newcomers.

your criteria slightly. There is a knack to this, so experiment to find out what works best for you. Occasionally you will need to accept defeat and cross a hypothetical plant off your list, but you will be doing this from an informed position. If an option suitable for your site was accessible, you would have found it. Go back to your 'consider adding' column to see what other hypothetical plant would work, then hunt down a real one for that description instead. The completed table above shows plant choices selected in this way.

Working through your list choosing plants for each role is a lovely way to spend the winter evenings. When the process is complete, you will have travelled full circle, from observations on the ground, through the abstract, on to the hypothetical, into the actual and then back out onto the ground again. As a result of this process, you will have a plant-hunting list based on your

personal taste and your existing garden: one which is full of unfamiliar but carefully considered and fully researched choices. ■



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Extracted from *In Nature's Slipstream* by Carol Bruce (DK) £25, on sale 7 May.