

Tune in to the late show

Autumn perennials are a joy, says **James Alexander-Sinclair**

Seasons are a bit like rock stars: in the spring it is all thrusting ambition, the summer is about showing off and promiscuity, the autumn is more settled and laid back, while winter is a bit past it. The ground between summer and autumn – between driving riffs and acoustic sets – has always been in dispute. For the pessimist it is time to hunker down, reach for the woollens and start tidying borders in expectation of chilly days yet to come. The optimists, meanwhile, live in endless (if occasionally forlorn) hope of an Indian summer.

I number myself firmly among the latter and have always considered this to be one of the most exciting times of the year. This is the moment when plants are grown up enough to know what they are doing but relaxed enough not to worry. The weather swerves frantically from glorious sun to icy wind and it is a moment of voluptuous middle age for the garden.

I first met this Northamptonshire garden about five years ago: my clients, Mike and Janie Sheldon, had just moved back to England after previously gardening at the top of a mountain in Kenya and in the deserts of Arabia. The idea of a windswept tangle on top of a damp hill appealed as it was, unsurprisingly, a bit different.

The garden had, once upon a time, been well cared for but those days had long since faded. There were a few very good mature trees (including a particularly fine oak) and

Above, clockwise from top left: perennials and grasses include Echinacea purpurea, Persicaria amplexicaulis 'Alba', Molinia 'Windspiel' and Rudbeckia laciniata 'Herbstsonne'; lavender catches the sunlight; pleached hornbeam hedge with purple sage in foreground, Verbena bonariensis; red admiral on Scabiosa columbaria subsp. ochroleuca

some hedges but most of the garden was pretty indistinct and wishy-washy.

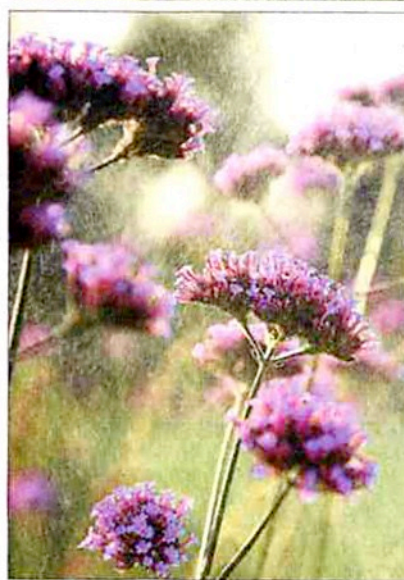
What this garden needed was a centre, a great throbbing heart: something from which everything else could radiate and return. Every garden has to have one – it can be a tree, a terrace, a lawn or even just a back door – but without one the garden lacks a point of focus.

We decided that the place to build our focal point was in an old vegetable garden that was surrounded by salvageable holly hedges and currently home to a flurry of bramble and scraggy grass (with, if I recall, a single lupin as a memorial to former glories).

After much clearance, digging and general kerfuffle we succeeded. You enter this garden by a set of wide stone steps flanked by a pair of matching terraces (each one catches the sun at a different time of day).

The design needed to be strong, so we decided on a beefy canal to run the whole way through the garden. There was much discussion about the relative advantages of rectangular and circular ponds. This was easily settled by having both, making a shape a little like the London Underground symbol.

The canal leads the eye on a journey through the garden while the circular pond gives room for an island that has space for an armchair or, at the moment, a sundial. To either side is a web of symmetrical paths, enclosing a clutch of overflowing borders that wash right up against the stone edges of the canal. The planting is mostly



herbaceous and floaty, apart from a screen of pleached hornbeam to mark the far boundary. Of course there is plenty to amuse earlier in the season but this garden is particularly strong at this time of year.

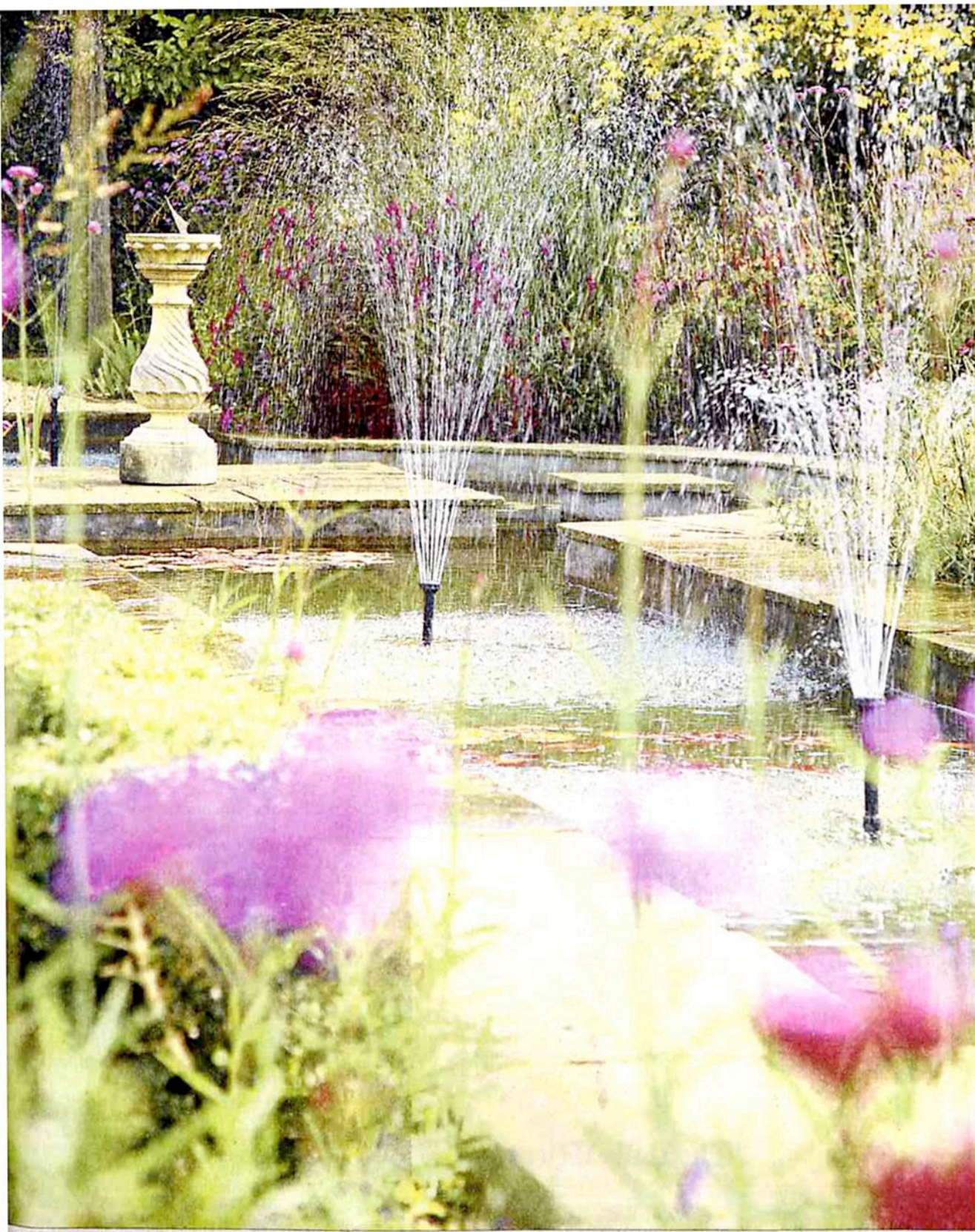
It is generally acknowledged that it is relatively straightforward to make a June garden sing and that the latter part of the summer and autumn is tricky. It isn't. There is a vast range of sparkly late-season perennials that can carry on the season right into the chills of November. Our grandparents used to have to rely on a range of mildew-y asters to entertain themselves in

An autumn garden can sing just as well, and as easily, as a June garden

October, but we are so much luckier. We have far more choice, from tall egg-yolk yellow rudbeckias to delicate white quills of persicarias. There are scatterings of the ubiquitous (and indispensable) *Verbena bonariensis* and gathered congregations of the stately grass, *Molinia* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Windspiel'. A rampaging horde of echinacea can be chased by toffee-coloured heleniums and eupatorium with flowers like fluffed-up pink omelettes. They all add a stonking great splash of glamour to the final sputterings of summer.

One of the best things about my job





as a garden designer is the opportunity to collaborate with delightful people. If those people throw themselves enthusiastically into the project, then that is even better. Janie Sheldon is extraordinarily diligent in maintaining this garden and spends a great deal of time happily upended in a border. I can even forgive her predilection for transforming innocent shrubs into woodland animals. After all, no client is completely perfect.

Late-season plants

- ❖ *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne': 6ft-plus tall with fine leaves, this is fabulous at the back of a border. There is a shorter version, *R. var. sullivanii* 'Goldsturm', which is about 3ft high.
- ❖ *Echinacea purpurea*: a thoroughly reliable and uplifting late-season plant. There are a few different varieties but it is best to steer clear of the bright orange ones as they are not reliably hardy. Stick with pink and white.
- ❖ *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster': at this time of year tall ornamental grasses come into their own. They have spent all year getting up to height and now their role develops from supporting act to megastar. Others worth watching are all the *Miscanthus sinensis* family.
- ❖ *Carpinus betulus* (hornbeam): along with limes this is one of the best trees for pleaching. Essentially, pleaching is the process of creating a hedge on a stick and is very useful for blocking off neighbours or eyesores. Here we have used it as an end wall to the garden.

Left, the canal with fountains; above, the Sheldons' Northants garden, with *Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain' lower left; right, *Echinacea purpurea*



Autumn flowerer

A number of plants will flower at this time of year if they are headed immediately into flowering. Among these are the salvias (we used *Salvia* 'Purple Rain') and have judiciously hacked off to flower later – for example, delphiniums, *Campylocheilum delavayi*. I cut back in May before they flowered) but instead of dead-heading as the

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