

Rainbow warriors

Get ready with those sunglasses... James Alexander-Sinclair has come up with some colourful planting ideas to set your borders sizzling this summer

Summer gardens (like summer holidays) are all about excess: enough scent to disorientate even the busiest bees, more colour than a jumbo paintbox, textures ranging from fleecy to slick, and an energetic chorus line of different leaf shapes.

It is possible to make this feeling of supreme profusion last from about now until September, provided one chooses reasonably carefully and in sufficient quantity. From September to November, the garden slides elegantly into a sort of postcoital torpor as flowers become fewer and exhausted plants fade to washed-out shadows of their former selves.

A successful border, then, should be like a battle against the odds – no sooner has one sensory assault faded than another begins as part of a constant advance of consecutively flowering plants.

If there were recipes for flowerbeds, the ingredients list for this one would be heavy on herbaceous perennials. There should, of course, always be roses and some shrubs, but too many will take up a lot of space in return for a relatively short flowering period. Look at it in terms of simple maths: a *Philadelphus x lemoinei*, say, has a footprint

of about 1.5 sq m and performs (deliciously) for a few weeks in June. In that same space, you could fit seven perennials that will flower consecutively for five months.

It all begins with tulips. Although there are some delightful bulbs that flower earlier (snowdrops, of course, and daffodils), none has the same voluptuousness as tulips. They are the true heralds of summer: no longer do we have to be satisfied with the small, pale flowers of winter; instead, there are deep reds and fragrant oranges.

As the tulips fade, the next wave takes over. This is the easy bit – in mid-summer, it seems as if everything is flowering. There are the classic English garden plants – the ones that make you want to wear a hat and have a picnic: roses, delphiniums, peonies and poppies. The leaves are still fresh and limey, the sun is shining and days melt into long, scented evenings.

As we slope into July, the early flowerers are fading and it is time for reinforcements: the annuals. It's easy to be a bit sniffy about annuals, but they can be invaluable, not just as an important, and flexible, part of the main planting, but as a sort of floral emergency service. There is no better way to jazz up a limping oriental poppy than a scattering of

cornflowers or group of nicotiana. Likewise, unforeseen gaps – child- or football-sized holes in planting, say – are easily plugged by dropping in cosmos or pelargoniums.

The last gasps of summer are one of the very best times. These are the glory days of many North American natives (notably the louche-petalled *Echinacea purpurea* and smiling yellow rudbeckias) and taller grasses (calamagrostis and molinia). Not forgetting the crescendo of dahlias and the late-flowering asters.

To be beautiful it is necessary to suffer, and the payback for this sort of hysterical abundance is that there will be a fallow time in deep winter when the view will be of empty borders. However, there is something thrilling about knowing that, beneath that dull brown, naked soil, the roots of countless plants are stirring and that, in just a few short weeks, they will erupt once more to cheer the harried soul.

MUST-HAVE HERBACEOUS PERENNIALS

Herbaceous perennials grow fast. Plant young plants now and you'll get a good-looking garden this season, something even better in year two, perfection in the third. Plant at least three perennials a square metre.

1 *Actaea simplex* 'James Compton' Willowy stems of fragrant flowers that come out in August/September. Fern-like black foliage. Height: 90cm x Spread: 60cm. Partial shade in moist soil.

2 *Achillea* 'Walther Funcke' Flat, suedeheaded flowers (from June to August) in vivid orange fading to pale pink. H: 50cm x S: 45cm. Needs sandy soil, OK in sun and light shade.

3 *Verbena hastata* Shorter (H: 1.2m x S: 60cm) than the ubiquitous *V. bonariensis*; flowers (in blue, pink or white) open in midsummer and last for weeks. Plant in sun in fertile soil.

4 *Salvia pratensis* Stems of blue flowers from May to July held above a rosette of leaves. H: 1m x S: 40cm. Likes full sun in well-drained soil.

5 *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne' A tall yellow daisy (H: 2m x S: 60cm) to light up late summer to early autumn. Likes well-drained soil in sun or shade.

6 *Aster* 'Little Carlow' From August to October, this forms a soft pillow of tiny daisies the colour of hot-washed denim. H: 1.4m x S: 80cm. Likes light shade in moist, fertile soil.

7 *Pericaria amplexicaulis* Flowers from July to October. 'Taurus' is red, 'Rosea' pink, and 'Alba' white. H: 1.2m x S: 1.2m. OK in partial shade, but for the best colours, plant in full sun.

READER OFFER

Buy any one of *Salvia pratensis*, *Verbena hastata* and *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne' for £8.95 (supplied in 9cm pots), or all three for £19.85. If you buy two collections, we'll send you a third free. Price includes UK mainland p&p. To order, call 0870 836 0908, quoting reference GUA207. Delivery within 28 days.



