



## JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

**M**y first glimpse of James Alexander-Sinclair's Northamptonshire garden comes via a narrow doorway in the back of his garage. If that sounds grotty, it shouldn't. Blackpitts, as this place is (now rather disingenuously) called, is a bit special. Before the designer moved here 13 years ago, this was a working farmyard, a proper rural setting, with all the grey, hose-downable concrete that that implies. Now, hemmed in by crumbly red-brick farm buildings and a perfectly camouflaged new house, it's unrecognisable.

Within these walls, people and plants are sheltered from the wind. If you don't count the racket of birds and bees, the world feels soundproofed. Narrow pathways of shattered slates lead between packed beds of tall, rangy flowers – foxgloves; big, floppy-headed poppies in smoky mauve; the distinctive globes of allium seedheads (hard to resist giving these a gentle squeeze) – and low

mounds of grasses. Elsewhere, pretty, self-seeding plants – love-in-a-mist (*Nigella*), bonnet bellflower (*Codonopsis ovata*) – tumble wantonly across gravel beneath arches of metal scaffold poles. Wispy coyote willow (*Salix exigua*) sways in the breeze. Amid all this delicacy swaggers the odd big bruiser, plants with burly stems and beefy foliage – cardoon, rogersia, angelica.

'I love things that grow very fast – they're such fun,' says Alexander-Sinclair.

This unabashed enthusiasm is as much a trademark as the battered outback-style hat that the designer sweeps off to shake hands. While (sub)urban gardeners toil away at year-round-interest, Alexander-Sinclair goes with nature's flow. His herbaceous borders may look impressive now, but in February he takes a strimmer to the lot. It all goes for composting in one of the old pigsties.

**Ripping yarns:** James Alexander-Sinclair didn't transform a cold, concrete farm by obeying the garden police. 'Plants aren't puppy dogs,' he says. 'If you don't like it, throw it away'

Doesn't that look terribly bare? 'No, it's lovely then – most of it's dead anyway, then you put the mulch on, so it's all brown. All you have to do is wait.' Isn't that unbearable? 'Look,' he says patiently, 'it's more exciting having the parcel in front of you wrapped up than unwrapping it. I know what's going to happen, so there's no point in being impatient.'

Plonked down on a grassy bank outside the house, Alexander-Sinclair's relaxed demeanour is infectious, and expedient. Blackpitts, after all, is home too to his wife Celestria (who tends the thriving organic vegetable plot), three children and two Tibetan terriers. Here, he has planted 'formal bracketing' in the shape of 10 clipped beech columns (there were 11, but the dogs ate one) which happen to make good goalposts. Nearby is his 'grass snake', a raised pathway created using the leftover topsoil from a client's garden. He 'drew' the path by driving a dumpster truck across the lawn, piling earth between the tyre-tracks. Now, he grins, 'It's like looking across a valley, albeit a small one.' It's the pragmatic, instinctive approach of someone who came to garden design via such varied earlier careers as building contractor and (even earlier) gossip columnist, having decided that 'people would pay more for my brain than my body'.

This unfussiness extends to Alexander-Sinclair's relationship with plants. Bright colours abound: purple, orange (*Geum pentapetalum* 'Prinses Juliana'), vampy-lipstick red (*Potentilla volcan*). Some are downright strange: *Verbascum bombyciferum*, for example, with its grotesquely downy silver stems and foliage. His latest find, the dark-red flowering *Centaurea benoistii*, he 'met' last year. 'I'm entranced by him,' he says. But if they don't work, he says, be ruthless: 'It's easy to change plants, they're not puppy dogs. If you don't want it, throw it away.' Above all, he says, remember: 'There's no such thing as the garden police.' Not even at Chelsea, I wonder? 'Well, yes, maybe at Chelsea...' he smiles. **Fiona Ratray**

www.blackpitts.co.uk. James Alexander-Sinclair presents Channel 4's Great Garden Challenge daily until 1 July

