

new perennial garden

# The prairie out back

Adrian de Baat had a perfectly nice, normal garden – until he discovered a whole new style of planting inspired by wild landscapes. Now his garden is full of dreamy, naturalistic combinations of elegant perennials and grasses

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## In brief

WHAT Long, narrow rear garden to family home built in 1928.

WHERE Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire.

SIZE A third of an acre.

SOIL Neutral to acid; gravelly by the house.

CONDITIONS Sheltered by surrounding mature trees; rear garden faces northwest.

SPECIAL FEATURES Borders influenced by Dutch planting designer Piet Oudolf; exotic garden inspired by travel.

Tall, airy flower heads of golden oat grass (*Stipa gigantea*) hover above brilliant red sparks of *Crocasmia 'Lucifer'*, blonde strands of Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*) and fluffy purple *Astilbe chinensis* var. *laqueata* 'Purpurlanze'.





Clare and Adrian's bright, open garden has a large lawn fringed with long borders packed with grasses and perennials.

The light of the converted shines in Adrian de Baat's eyes as he reminisces on his Damascene conversion to a new kind of gardening. "The defining moment was a sunny morning in September 2000," he says. "I had been to a rather uninspiring garden centre and, on a whim, followed a sign to a small nursery. I wandered in, to be confronted by waving stipas and the twisted red flowers of *Miscanthus* and realised that this was exactly what I wanted."

Adrian and his wife Clare first began gardening nearly 35 years ago when they moved into a handsome house in Welwyn Garden City. The garden was of a decent size – a third of an acre – but rather neglected: "There were a lot of oil barrels and old tyres among the few plants." Like most people they had no interest in gardens until they had one of their own so, having cleared away the detritus they did what everybody does: they started buying the odd plant that caught their eye in the local garden centre. This was the first incarnation of the garden: a big lawn with narrow borders and a vegetable patch and fruit cage at the far end. A classic design, functional but not exciting. As the years passed and their children grew, the garden evolved jerkily and without any particular style.

The path to Adrian's moment of clarity in the nursery followed his early retirement and a growing interest in the garden. He and Clare began visiting more gardens and the more they saw the more determined Adrian became to change the garden. "I realised that, in our unknowing enthusiasm, we had made a few mistakes and we needed to develop some sort of style to the garden. I also knew that I could make something quite special here."



Adrian has won over his wife Clare to his new style of planting – but he says she remains his sternest critic in gardening matters.

All this questing eventually led to that nursery, Bell Bar near Hatfield in Hertfordshire (which has since closed). Its owner, Simon Wener, introduced Adrian to the work of Piet Oudolf, the Dutchman most famous for pioneering the New Perennial movement. "Simon showed me Piet's book and I was sold." Adrian would go off plant-shopping and come back with armfuls of perennials and grasses. "Clare would take one look and groan: 'Not another grass!'" Slowly the garden evolved into its sophisticated and beautiful current state.

#### An original interpretation

The garden may be inspired by Oudolf, but as Adrian says, "I think that we have gone beyond a slavish impersonation and have developed our own twist on things." Clare's position in the garden is as outside critic, "weeder of the small pink things" and defender of the lawn ("Adrian wanted to make it much smaller but I like the lawn and wanted to keep it quite big.") It was her insight that led to the removal of the large golden *leylandii* "planted in a fit of enthusiasm many years ago", which then gave space for the first part of the new garden.

The space is long and thin, waisted like a bottle and roughly divided by a well-trimmed hedge. At the end is a charming exotic garden. Cleverly, there is also room for a well-concealed greenhouse, compost heap and all that necessary but unsightly stuff. The exotic garden is where the other great influence on the de Baats' planting style can be seen: travel. The paths wind around towering bananas, South African restios ("Kirstenbosch botanic



“I think that we have gone beyond a slavish impersonation and have developed our own twist on things”

Tall flower stems of purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and its pink cultivar 'Blush' mingle with the shaggy, purple-red flowers of the bee balm *Monarda* 'Gewitterwölke'.





## Planting ideas

### 1 Romantic meadow

Elegant grasses lend this perennial planting a relaxed atmosphere. From left: pale pink flowers of the bee balm *Monarda* 'Fishes' are set against a haze of the grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau'; and magenta coneflowers – the classic North American prairie plant *Echinacea purpurea* – mingle with oatmeal-coloured plumes of the rough feather grass (*Stipa calamagrostis*). Beneath are the deep red daylilies of *Hemerocallis* 'American Revolution', and on the right, similarly shaped tapering flower heads in crimson (*Ferocaris amplexicaulis* 'Atrosanguinea') and purple (*Agestache rugosa* 'Licorice Blue').

### 2 Perennial contrasts

In the centre, Adrian pairs two plants of similar form and size but with contrasting flower colour – purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) next to white blooms of willow-leaved loosestrife (*Lysimachia ephemerum*). In front of them, the bright green foliage of North America wild oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) is flanked by cuskier colours: on the left, dark purple emerging flowers of *Angelica gigas* with the bronze-green foliage and ruby-red blooms of *Monarda* 'Raspberry Wine'; on the right, the bronze-purple leaves of *Sedum* 'Matrona' make a superb edging plant.

### 3 Drama up front

Rather than stick to borders that rise uniformly from front to back, Adrian uses tall, architectural plants at key points in the front of his borders, such as the end of the northern border. The forward position means that the stately, 1.5m-tall flower spikes and dramatic foliage of spiny bear's breeches (*Acanthus spinosus*) can be admired close up. The metallic purple hoods of the white flowers combine well with the planting beyond, including purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and pale blue *Salvia sclarea* (far right).

### 4 Spotlight plants

The back of the house is in shade for much of the morning, making it an ideal backdrop for tall airy plants that catch the sun. Here another tall edging plant, the golden oat grass *Stipa gigantea*, marks the end of the border with a cloud of sunlit inflorescences. Set just behind it, the white flower stems of the Spanish dagger (*Yucca gloriosa*, named for its spiky leaves) rise to a height of up to 2.1m, and shine out against the light shadows behind. Similar effects can be achieved against dark yew hedges.





Beyond the lawn and main borders lies this small sheltered area, laid out around a hummock of golden *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' and fringed with the scarlet speckles of *Potentilla thurberi* 'Monarch's Velvet' and deep purple-pink *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen'.



*Echinacea* 'White Swan' flowers from June to August among the soft foliage of the leather grass, *Stipa tenuissima*.



The pinkish flower buds of *Sedum* 'Matrona' contrast with the pompom heads of *Allium sphaerocephalon*.

▷ garden in Cape Town was the most inspirational place I have ever visited," says Adrian, and even a bed of cacti.

The larger part of the garden is given over to Adrian's Oudolfian fantasy. "The tension between formal and informal fascinates me," he says. Strict boundary hedges to either side enclose a frothing horde of delicious grasses and late-summer perennials. "I like sturdy perennials with wildflower characteristics," which is, of course, the essence of this style of planting: to make things look untamed, while retaining the colour and form of a domestic garden. Glorious monardas, drifts of echinaceas (many grown from his own seed) and throbbing persicarias cavort among *Stipa calamagrostis* and *S. tenuissima*. Looking on with a tolerant amusement are a venerable azalea and the few shrubs that survive from the garden's early days in the 1970s.

Here is a life beautifully illustrated in one suburban garden. It is a map of Adrian and Clare's journey from young beginners to confident and mature gardeners: a life painted eloquently in plants and stories. ▢

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

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OPEN under the National Gardens Scheme on 31 July (2pm-5.30pm) and 23 October (2pm-5pm). Admission £3.50. Also open by appointment, June to October (admission £5, including tea and cake).

James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer and broadcaster who co-presented television coverage of the Chelsea Flower Show 2011.



The garden of Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf is a spectacular showcase for 'naturalistic' plantings of perennials and ornamental grasses.

#### The New Perennial movement

This naturalistic planting style has grown in influence over the last 20 years. New Perennial gardens typically feature elegant grasses and a palette of wild-looking herbaceous perennials including *Echinacea*, *Eryngium*, *Persicaria*, *Veronicastrum*, *Rudbeckia* and *Aster*, often planted in drifts. Many of these plants grow wild in meadow and prairie habitats: planting them together in gardens mimics natural plant communities. New Perennial plants are often long-flowering and easy to maintain; many bloom in late summer. Spent plants are valued for their seedheads, which are left in place through the winter. Naturalistic planting can be traced back to the work of Irish garden writer William Robinson (1838-1935) and German nurseryman Karl Foerster (1874-1970). The prairie-style plantings by Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden in the USA from the late 1970s were also influential. Since the mid-1990s the leading figure in this style of planting is Piet Oudolf, one of the so-called Dutch Wave of planting designers (see issue 166). Oudolf projects include the High Line in New York and Penthorpe in Norfolk. [Oudolf's latest book is reviewed on page 101.]



Vivid red *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Atrosanguinea' blooms between floppy plumes of *Stipa calamagrostis* and creamy *Persicaria x fernica*.



The aromatic foliage and pink flowers of *Monarda* 'Fishes' float above a cloud of tussock grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau').