

Green Fingers

We are all plant hunters now. All it takes is a road sign saying "Nursery : Unusual Plants" to have us shooting off into the undergrowth of remote country lanes, bumping along cart tracks and ploughing through in search of our quarry. Our Sunday visits to gardens open to the public under the National Garden Scheme all have to begin with a rush to the plant stall, in case all the best goodies have gone. We return home with cars looking like a forest on wheels, trees and shrubs sticking out of the sun roof, herbaceous perennials climbing out of the windows.

We arrive home triumphant - then I wonder just how many of us try and sneak our purchases past a suspicious spouse, who is convinced the garden is quite full enough already? Then the horrible realisation which follows - that he's quite right, and where on earth are we going to put them all?

Lesson one is - never put them to one side and think you'll work it out later. The poor plants will sit there, suffering in their pots, silently reproaching you for your extravagance. Planting them will turn from a pleasure into a chore. Plant them as soon as you get home, (he'll never spot them then) while the pleasure of acquisition is still upon you.

So the crisis of finding a place is immediate, but it will be enormously simplified if you have colour schemes in your beds. This helps not only with finding a place where your new purchase will look at home, but will also help you make more sensible impulse buys.

The elusive colour that your border needs is easy to remember when you were probably lamenting its absence that very morning. The very best time to fill a colour gap in a border with just the right colour is when the plant is in flower. And it is when a plant is in flower that we tend to fall for it in the nursery. The ideal way to start a colour border is from scratch. If you should find yourself in this unusual and fortunate position, don't forget your weeds. You will be eternally grateful afterwards if you plan your border to include the colour of your predominant weed - unless you are one of those rare souls who keep an immaculate garden. I curse every year when I fondly gaze at my border of hardy geraniums



in quiet pinks and soft blues - and find bright yellow creeping buttercup screaming defiance at me.

I like to think that rose bay willow herb fits in all my colour schemes - well, I would like to think so, since it certainly tries to insinuate itself into them all. It is surprising how often it looks glorious. I love it where it grows all around a cornus alba Elegantissima - a variegated shrub with the additional treat of good red stems for winter if you cut it hard back in the spring. The willow herb also looks surprisingly good in my "bright" garden, with reds and strong yellows.

If making a colour border would mean moving plants, autumn is the season for you to do it. The best time to move plants is when you can still remember what they are and see where they are. You don't have to set aside a whole border for one or two colours - you could range the colours down the border following the sequence of the rainbow. You can grow one series of colours in the spring, and have the border change colour in the autumn. The best bit will be that all your random purchases will not end up looking like a scrappy mess, but help to create a wonderful garden picture.

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