DREAMING THE NEW PERENNIAL GARDEN: TONY SPENCER

This overview of the New Perennial movement and various methods of planting is designed to supplement my talk. Feel free to visit my blog, thenewperennialist.com to continue your explorations.

Definition:

The New Perennial movement is a modern form of naturalistic planting design with roots in Northern Europe. Over the past decade, it has generated massive appeal, primarily because of the work of visionary Dutch planting designer, Piet Oudolf *(Ow-dolf)*. Piet is regarded as the godfather of the movement on the strength of landmark public projects like the High Line in NYC and Lurie Gardens in Chicago, as well as an excellent series of books co-authored with English garden writer Dr. Nöel Kingsbury.

Over the past ten years or so, the movement has swept worldwide to latitudes north and south. If you see ornamental grass growing in a garden, you know whom to thank.

Essence of the style:

This plant-driven design movement combines herbaceous perennials and ornamental grasses to create dynamic naturalistic plantings that emulate wild plant communities – fusing together aesthetic artistry with ecological awareness to create a kind of supercharged vision of nature.

A movement unlike any other:

The New Perennial movement looks and learns from nature to embrace the full evolutionary life cycle of plants and their place in the garden. It finds beauty not just in flowers, but also in seedheads and skeletons – in the progression of time from birth to bloom, and from decay to death.

Philosophically, it is ultimately about gardening in partnership with nature.

Oudolf, as plantsman assembled his own plant palette over decades of trialing numerous species in his own garden nursery at Hummelo (from sources in England, Germany, Netherlands). His evolving palette includes many genera not previously considered garden-worthy: umbellifers, acteas, sanguisorbas, persicarias, many prairie-style perennials, and in particular, a wide selection of ornamental grasses.

While Piet is highly regarded for expressing a singular and evocative signature style, he actively encourages other designers and gardeners to find their own "voice" within the greater context of the movement.

A Brief History:

Originating in the Netherlands, the movement was first called the Dutch Wave and later New Wave planting. It was a cross-pollination of ideas about naturalistic planting design, art, philosophy, horticulture etc. and came about in the early 80s – brought into being through the *Open Days* gatherings held at the Hummelo nursery in Gelderland, hosted by Piet and Anja Oudolf.

Even with its focus on plants and new ways to think about gardens, the Dutch Wave was always a people-driven movement. It was a conscious rejection of all that had come before with British-based mixed border planting design. The leading figures of the Dutch Wave were Piet Oudolf, Henk Gerritsen, Rob Leopold, Ton ter Linden... with Piet emerging as its defining creative force.

Gerritsen's book *Essay on Gardening* provides an excellent overview and the creative relationship between himself and Oudolf was the genesis of the movement. The more recently published *Hummelo: The Journey of a Plantsman*, written by Kingsbury and Oudolf, tells the story of those early, pivotal years and Piet's constant evolution towards becoming arguably the most influential landscape designer of our time.

NEW PERENNIAL MOVEMENT = Art + Ecology

ART/DESIGN: Learn the creative language of new perennial planting design starting with the basic vocabulary of flower forms and foliage.

- **Forms:** globes, buttons, spikes, umbels, spires, daisies, screens, curtains
- **Foliage:** leaves, shapes and textures

THE PALETTE/ PLANT SELECTION:

The design process starts with plant selection:

- robust, long-flowering plants with a wild character
- proportions between flower, seed head, leaf and stem
- balance between form and texture

Planting design is about combining various **FORMS** to create **RELATIONSHIPS** Looking to nature for inspiration to combine and contrast form, shape, and texture.

ECOLOGY: Grouping plants by common habitat. e.g. Sun vs. shade. Soil composition. Wet vs. Zeric. Hardiness zone etc.

Nöel Kingsbury: The rabbit's-eye point of view

By close **observation**, we can learn to better understand how different perennials grow and what that means for garden performance: clonal growth (plants that clone or replicate themselves from the crown) vs. cespitose (woody roots with minimal spread), guerilla plants (which spread adventitiously) vs. self-seeders, etc. Noel offers an excellent online course covering these topics at *MyGarden School*.

Here's the thing: Piet Oudolf's plantings look spontaneous, but are in fact, highly ordered horticultural and artistic compositions – inspired by nature and extrapolated by imagination.

NEW PERENNIALIST DESIGN PRACTICALS:

This is a good process to cover the bases and get yourself started:

- **Ecology:** Analyze local conditions in your garden to determine your basic habitat: Is it woodland edge, dry meadow, open ground etc. ? Hardiness zone?
- Determine amount of sunlight (full sun/part sun), soil type with a simple soil test, (acidic vs. alkaline, moisture levels)
- Knowing your habitat is key to making informed decisions with plant selection
- **Aesthetics:** Imagine a theme or mood for your future garden. Joyful, mysterious, restrained…
- Pick 2-3 structural theme plants/grasses to anchor the planting design
- Create and research plant-list of species that associate well with theme plants
- As a general rule, go for a 70:30 ratio of structure plants vs. filler plants
- Sketch out your ideas on paper – trying different combinations
- Freely group plants by common habitat / mixing natives + non-natives
- Buy 9 cm perennial pots vs. 1 gallon pots where possible to save money
- Group plants in a matrix, blocks, drifts, intermingling, or in combinations
- Space closely at average 1-foot apart (leaving more room for larger plants)
- In a new planting, mulch around plants with 3-4" of a fine pine or cedar mulch – taking care to keep it away from the crowns of the plants
- In a shady woodland planting, shred your fall leaves and use as mulch – and repeat every fall or spring to build up the fertility of the soil
- Avoid double-digging etc. to leave soil undisturbed (unless heavily compacted)
- Establish plantings with a solid first season of watering and weeding

DESIGN ESSENTIALS: WORKING IN LAYERS

When looking to create a garden that is naturalistic meadow, prairie, woodland – Piet Oudolf has pioneered a very useful method to create layered plantings that are relatively easy to understand on paper.

It starts by creating a plant list of species for the site: grouped by common habitat, and which fulfill his aesthetic and ecological criteria.

The planting design may use different styles either alone or in combination: block planting, intermingling, matrix planting etc. It can be effective, for example, to juxtapose wilder plantings with more coherent structures or frameworks.

On paper, the complete planting design is comprised of a series of interrelated layers, which can all be visualized in a *plan* drawing – showing the garden space as viewed from above and measured to scale (i.e. 1:100m on a metrical architectural scale).

To design intermingled or blended plantings, Oudolf draws each layer on a sheet of tracing paper, overlaying one on top of the next to create the complete design. It's a way to simplify the design process with the plants represented by visual symbols:

1. The first layer is comprised of the tree and shrub layer (existing and planned)
2. The second layer is the perennial planting showing the grouping of **primary plants** and **scatter plants**
3. The third (and fourth) layer shows the **matrix planting** and/or **filler plants**
   Note: The designer may prefer to start with either the matrix layer or the primary plants when designing the perennial planting.

Definitions:

- Primary Plants are structural plants that rise above the matrix alone or in groups
- Scatter plants are repeated throughout to provide visual unity and spontaniety
- Filler plants are gap plants with interest for less than 3 months

ENTER THE MATRIX

Matrix *Def.* 'a surrounding substance within which something else originates, develops, or is contained'

A matrix evokes natural habitats like a meadow or woodland where a small number of species form the greater biomass, studded with a smaller number of visually dominant structural plants.

Recognize that the matrix is often the initial layer in a more complex planting design based on intermingling different species

Think of NK's fruitcake analogy where the matrix is like the bready part containing all the bits of fruit and currants.

Matrix plant attributes:

- Visually quiet, soft colours, and without striking form
- Effective space-fillers that mesh together well
- Maintains some structure after flowering
- Low maintenance, long-lived

Examples*:* Grasses have many of these qualities, especially tussock-forming or cespitose varieties (bunch grasses), which are not so competitive as spreading varieties.

Clump-forming perennials: *Grown mostly for foliage*

Heuchera, Tellima, Epimedium, or woodland species of Saxifraga

Perennials to use as supporting cast in matrix:

Limonium, Sedum telephium, S. spectabile, Eryngium, Iris sibirica,

Running /spreading species for shade:

Phlox stolonifera, Adiantum pedatum

Simplicity: Consider using a limited plant combination randomized over a large area, adding other plants in smaller quantities or using large blocks with different matrix species to create interwoven patterns.

POSSIBLE MATRIX PLANTS: SOURCES PIET OUDOLF/ RICK DARKE

Google search botanical plant names or visit Missouri Botanical Garden site for more info:

Perennials:

Acaena species and cultivars

Asarum Europaeum, A. Canadensis

Asperula odorata (Gallium odoratum)

Aster divaricata

Calamintha nepeta subsp. nepeta

Campanula glomerata

Coreopsis verticillata

Epimedium species and cultivars

Euphorbia amygdaloides

Geranium nodosum

Geranium sanguineum and cultivars

Geranium soboliferum

Geranium wallichianum

Heuchera species and cultivars

Iris sibirica

Lamium maculatum

Liriope species and related genera like Ophiopogon, Reineckia

Limonium platyphyllum

Origanum species and cultivars

Phlox stolonifera, P. divaricata and other procumbent phlox

Salvia *x*superba, S. nemorosa, S *x*sylvestris

Saponaria lempergii 'Max Frei'

Saxifraga, clump-forming woodland species

Sedum 'Bertram Anderson' and other low-growing sedums

Stachys byzantina

Tellima grandiflora

Grasses and grass-like plants:

Carex bromoides

Carex pensylvanica, many other potential Cares

Deschampsia cespitosa

Hakonechloa macra

Luzula species

Molinia caerulea, smaller varieties

Nassella tenuissima (syn. Stipa tenuissima)

Schizachryium scoparium

Sesleria species

Sporobolus heterolepis

Ferns:

Adiantum pedatum

Athyrium species and cultivars

Matrix combination examples:

The High Line:

Sporobolus heterolepis

Panicum 'Shenandoah'

Leuvehoofd (Rotterdam):

Deschampsia cespitosa 'Goldschleier'

Sedum telephium 'Sunkissed'

Limonium latifolium

Primary (repeating) plants:

Molinia 'Moorhexe'

Helenium 'Moerheim Beauty'

Agastache foeniculum

Festuca mairei

Van Veggel Garden:

Sporobolus heterolepis (65%)

Echinacea purpurea 'Virgin' (25%)

Eryngium alpinum (10%)

Ichtushof (Rotterdam)/ Part shade matrix:

Molinia caerulia 'Moorhexe' (5-7 plants per M^2)

Tellima grandiflora 'Purpurea' (5-9 plants per M^2)

Primary (repeating) plants:

Darmera peltata (7 per spot)

Eupatorium rugosum 'Chocolate' (3 per spot)

Anemone 'Hadspen Abundance' (50%)

Geranium 'Sue Crûg' (25%)

Salvia 'Pink Delight (25%)

Amsonia 'Blue Ice'

Aster tataricus 'Jindai'

Deschampsia cespitosa 'Goldtau' (5 per spot)

Briza media (3 per spot)