Generous Use of Perennials

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Abstract
The use of perennials in public spaces has been extensively discussed in recent years. This exercise has involved an active and lively exchange of information and experiences at symposia and in journals. Most concepts pertaining plant use tend to plantings which are economical and require minimal maintenance. Viable solutions include appropriate planting for the selected area, and realistic assessment of maintenance costs. Our conception of planning was decisively influenced by the work of American landscape architects Oehme and van Sweden. We recognised in their way of plant use an opportunity to provide accents through the use of perennials and grasses in public spaces. A special attraction is the contrast between architecture and rich natural vegetation. Through this interaction new pictures emerge in the creative context with the surroundings and attract the viewer as a whole. The planting design is simple and roughly structured, nevertheless it allows a continuity in flowering, and thus a constant seasonal change of appearance of the planting. Relatively extensive plantings of single species are interweaved in a natural way. At any point of time only two to three plants are in bloom. Exactly this restricted diversity produces strong images with good effects, varying over time. The limitation of species numbers implies a stringent selection. Candidate plants must be robust, have long flowering periods, attractive foliage and texture. The design principle can also successfully be transferred to small private gardens by proportionally correct application. This attractive design option can even be a low maintenance alternative to lawn.

INTRODUCTION
An insatiable interest in perennials and ornamental grasses, annuals, trees and shrubs is driving masses of people to visit gardens, exhibits and garden shows every year. Garden and home magazines consider gardening as a philosophy of life; they describe trends and sell moods. Plants always play the main role. The private interest for the magic of flowers seems unabashed.

How does this interest in plants manifest itself in the public realm (parks, playgrounds, shopping malls, resorts, etc.)? There are trends in design where plants are not used to the fullest extent. Special materials like wood, concrete, glass and metal with different and experimental design often dominate. Special ground modulation, light effects and water in different forms, seem to have priority over plants. It seems plants are used more as decoration or as a static design element. There is a desire for shaped plants, hedges, large trees and lawns as a finished and unchanging product. There remains no room and no time for the dynamics of the plants. In contrast, public agencies are limited by a need to supply well-maintained open spaces and by the financial reality. This problem allows little flexibility for a careful and intensive maintenance programme for the plants. But this does not signal the end of the road. New concepts and strategies are needed.

For several years landscape architects and related professionals have been looking for new trends and directions (Symposium Perennial Perspectives in Arnhem 1996, Symposium Staudenverwendung in der Stadt in Berlin 2000, Hertle 1999, Meyer 1999, Luz 2001, Schönfeld 1999). Different ways of using perennials in the garden are being discussed: mixed perennial plantings, annual seedings combined with punctuation
plantings of perennials, widespread perennial plantings, prairie plantings, plantings with reduced number of species combined with solitary accent plants and so on. The ideas lean toward incorporating cost-saving methods, particularly in maintenance, and the simplification of plantings. In practice, the optimum solutions are best suited to the specific location and provide the widest possibility for low maintenance. Figures 1 and 2 show two examples of contemporary plantings in public spaces.

Our own design with perennials was profoundly influenced by the work and examples of U.S. landscape architects Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden (Oehme & van Sweden 1990, van Sweden 1997). We saw in this type of planting, a standard for public spaces. Particular charm and contrast created between the building environment and the exuberant plant life with perennials and grasses. This way of planting unifies the space and garden experience. The experience of these plantings in an urban environment is dependant on the scale. In the city, life is hectic and plant details are not noticed or absorbed by the passerby. The buildings are massive; streets and open spaces are large scale. The plants have to compete with that scale and to do that, they themselves need to be large in scale.

Clear lines and simplicity do not mean monotony and boredom. Although our favourite principle consists of large-scale plantings and structures, with few plant varieties, it also includes long flowering periods. There are constant changes in the flowering according to the seasons. Relative large planting of one plant variety is thus woven together in a more natural way. Because of the large scale planting, only two or three plant species are in bloom at any given time. But because of the limited types of plants, this creates a better impact, in particular from a certain distance (Figure 3).

The pattern of the large-scale basic ground planting is structured with focal points and specimen plants; this results in a kind of layered appearance. This can be achieved with large perennials, grasses or woody plants. Also the combination of leaf textures creates a special effect and this is an important factor compared with the flowering period. Because of the limited number of plant varieties, it is important to use resistant plants with similar requirements and growth patterns together with good leaf texture throughout the growing season.

Such a large scale planting has to be long-lived and easy to maintain. Plants with similar growth habits will ensure a long-lasting combination. Also important are the height and foliage density to insure a maximum density to suppress weak growth and germination of weed seeds. (Figure 4). *Euphorbia amygdaloides 'Robbiae'*(Almond Spurge), *Lysimachia clethroides* (Gooseneck Loosestrife), *Aster macrophyllus 'Albus'* (Bigleaved Aster), *Stachys grandiflora 'Superba'* (Lamb’s Ear), and *Chelone oblique* (Turtle Head) are some of the spreading plants which develop into a dense cover. Examples of plants with dense foliage are *Phlomis russeliana* (Jerusalem Sage), *Rudbeckia deamii* (Black-Eyed Susan), several tall *Sedum* species, as well as *Geranium* and *Aster*.

Taller plants are important in this dense groundcover planting to create structure. They lead the eye through the planting and connect the different plant varieties. Among taller perennials there are *Boltonia asteroides* (False Aster), *Aster ericoides*, *Aster pringlei*, *Aster cordifolius* (Blue–Wood and other Asters), *Helianthus microcephalus* (Small Wood Sunflower), *Persicaria polymorpha* (Smartweed), *Solidago rugosa* (Goldenrod), and *Cephalaria gigantea* (Giant Scabious).

Plants, suitable for specimen effect are, among others: *Crambe cordifolia* (Seakale), *Aralia cordifolia* (Cordate Spikenard), *Telekia speciosa* (Ox eye Daisy), *Persicaria polymorpha* (Smartweed), as well as larger *Hosta* like *Hosta elata*, *Hosta plantaginea* hybrid, and *Hosta ‘Sum & Substance’* (Figures 5 and 6).

A good contrast to the perennials is achieved with grasses. The beauty, airy texture, and elegant appearance combine with flexible grass blades and interesting flower stalks. Their natural, almost wild character adds a special attraction for this type of planting. Grasses are also adaptable, robust, and not sensitive to diseases and pests. They also grow relatively fast and fill in the spaces.
Varieties of grasses come in different forms and are suitable for various situations. They can be woven throughout the perennial plantings either planted large scale or in small groups or even as a single specimen. As a specimen in the foreground, grasses can set the rhythm for the whole planting. Some examples of grasses are *Festuca mairei* (Atlas fescue), *Achnatherum brachytrichum* (Silver Spike Grass), *Molinia arundinacea* (Tall Moor Grass), *Stipa gigantea* (Giant Feather Grass), and *Carex pendula* (Pendulous Sedge).

The middle, or the background, is frequently dominated by selections from various varieties of *Miscanthus*. There are narrow, delicate-looking leaf -types (*M. gracillimus*) and also the robust wide-leaf types. There are different growth heights available, so they can be used for different situations.

Specimen grasses can be used in large masses or small groupings. They wave through the middle or higher portion of the planting area. Examples are: *Panicum virgatum* (Switchgrass), *Spodiopogon sibiricus* (Siberian Graybeard) and *Calamagrostis acutiflora* (Feather Reed Grass).

Groundcover varieties for the foreground are: *Deschampsia caespitosa* (Hair Grass), *Hakonechloa macra* (Japanese Forest Grass), *Carex species* (Sedge), and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* (Fountain Grass).

Shade trees and specimen woody plants add a special relationship to the perennial planting. They provide structure, and are a permanent (all season) framework for the planting. Particularly in the spring when most perennials and grasses are cut down, the woody framework has an important function. There are some that stand out at different seasons, like autumn colour, evergreen and/or an interesting structure e.g. *Sorbus koehneana*, *S. serotina* (Mountain Ash), *Stranvaesia davidiana* (Christmas Berry), *Prunus serotina* (Birch Bark Tree), and *Trophodendron araloides* (Wheel Tree).

The type of planting described can also be used without hesitation in smaller garden spaces (Figure 7). Perennials and grasses can cover large areas of the garden. Where most people would have lawn, there can be leafy and flowering perennials and grasses. Paths can lead through the planting. Sitting areas can create close-up viewing at eye level. The observer is right in the middle to watch the growing, flowering, and seed formation (combined with fragrance and colour), of the variety of flowers. The planting areas can absorb large parts of the space, or even better, replace the lawn. Large groups of perennials form a dense cover; specimen perennials, grasses, trees and shrubs provide structure. To achieve an interesting garden, it is important to select long-flowering perennials and a range of varieties which flower in different seasons. A planting that creates a dense cover shades out weeds and tree-seedlings. Also, the selection of plants is important – perennials that do not need much attention. In particular, grasses are not difficult and are easy to maintain.

**CONCLUSIONS**

If grasses and perennials are used, not only in private gardens but also in public areas, landscape architects have to be familiar with, and use plants as design elements. The landscape architect has to use environmental and experimental ideas to create artistic designs with plants. One should not say, “This is not possible.” Rediscover the plant world and be adventurous.

Close liaison with decision and policy makers is important. The right solutions can emerge from mutual understanding, joint actions and problem solving leading to acceptance of such plantings.

**Literature Cited**


Figures

![Prairie planting in Weinheim/Germany. Designed by Cassian Schmidt.](image)
Fig. 2. Planting of traffic island in Neuenburg am Rhein/Germany. Designed by Ewald Hügin.

Fig. 3. Larger Groups of *Persicaria polymorpha* and *Geranium x ‘Patricia’* provide strong accents with good impact on distance. Planting at International Horticultural Exhibition (IGA) 2003 in Rostock/Germany. Designed by P. Pelz.
Fig. 4. Perennials can form dense ground cover. Planting at International Horticultural Exhibition (IGA) 2003 in Rostock/Germany, designed by P. Pelz.

Fig. 5. *Telekia speciosa* is well suited as a specimen plant. University of Applied Sciences, Merseburg/Germany
Fig. 6. The statuesque *Eremurus robustus* can have a leading function in a planting. International Horticultural Exhibition (IGA) 2003 in Rostock/Germany, designed by P. Pelz.

Fig. 7. Large groups of perennials and grasses form a dense, abundant and intriguing vegetation. Private garden Pelz in Biederitz, Germany.