Making a dash for the border

A vital element of the traditional English garden, herbaceous borders require careful planning and clever planting to be a success. NIGEL COLBORN offers some valuable ideas on how to achieve a satisfying effect.

I WAS TAKEN TO TASK, on a garden visit one day, when I tried to compliment my host on his splendid flower beds. ‘There are no flower beds in this garden,’ he retorted. ‘What you are looking at are borders!’ Though he was being pedantic, of course, his reply helped me to understand the vast difference between a ‘bed’, planted with ornamentals or vegetables, and an ‘herbaceous border’, where shapes, flowers and foliage are composed together to create a visual symphony.

The difference between a well-designed herbaceous border and a flower bed is similar to the difference between a good film and a bad one. In a poor production, plot lines are predictable, characters shallow and one leaves the cinema feeling cheated.

Great films, however, engage you with complex characters, a compelling story, haunting soundtrack and images that etch into your memory. A well-designed border is just like that: the plants must be interesting, with subtle variations in colour or texture, and with engaging quirks and foibles. Like a film plot, the planting will be full of surprises, special moments and cunning twists, and the overall view, like the photography and musical
Even this small section of double border has all the attributes of a much grander scheme. Height comes from the plants — those at the back could be more than 2m (6½ft) high — but there is astonishing depth and richness, too, and just enough repetition to tie the planting together. Although the colour range is wide, all the plants belong comfortably together, largely because of careful placing. Furthermore, despite formal dimensions and a relatively straight path, the plants are just on the brink of becoming chaotic, thus creating as naturalistic a scene as possible without spoiling the garden's design. Height comes from delphiniums and creamy scabious Cephalaria gigantea with purple Geranium psilostemon and plenty of grassy foliage for luxuriance. Bright yellow Anthemis, on either side, gives a burst of intense colour; its effect further enhanced by the silvery foliage and white flowers of Anaphalis planted nearby. Despite the wealth of mixed colours, the predominant hues here — as in every well planted border — are shades of green, contributed by a rich variety of foliage.

Gertrude Jekyll is often credited with the invention of flower borders, but they go back further. John Rea, for instance, describes the elements of plant association in his 17th-century Worcestershire garden, using peonies, anemones and irises to create a spring display, but it was Jekyll who first got to grips with colour and composition, and her contemporary, William Robinson, who ceaselessly reminded gardeners of the merits of using naturalistic planting.

**Keys to successful planting**

With most flower borders, structural elements and outline will already be in place. Pathways, well-placed trees, hedging or structures give a framework, and terracing can introduce different levels. Assuming that ‘good bones’ are in place, the essential matter of filling out the border with plants can begin.