In the past, border plants were arranged in discrete groups or blocks which, one hoped, would harmonise. Nowadays, more relaxed planting schemes are preferred, where drifts of colour and texture merge together, just as in truly wild landscapes. In detail — and that is where the art of good planting really shows through — lie vignettes of fine plant associations: a feathery fern, perhaps, contrasting with a broad-leaved hosta; waving grasses, punctuated by broader, more static foliage; burnished autumn leaves contrasting with the pinks or mauves of perennial asters.

Careful colour composition is more important in a border than almost anywhere else. It is wise to think in general colour groups before getting down to detail, and to plan an overall scheme: garden-wide if possible.

‘Relaxed planting schemes, where drifts of colour and texture merge together, are now widely planted’

General themes might be warm and bright, using reds, oranges or golds, or ice-cool with blues, whites and pale variegated foliage. Contrasting themes may need segregating to avoid clashes, but abundant foliage and 'link' plants will help to effect a gradual change from one theme to another. Purple flowers, for example, can bridge the gulf between golds and blues or reds. White flowers are handy for levelling a display, and for separating colours that might otherwise clash.

Continuity
It is neither possible nor desirable to sustain maximum colour all year. Even if it could be achieved, it would be like music performed at a full constant volume — exciting at first, but rapidly becoming tiresome. A series of crescendos, separated by quieter spells, will give a border more interesting dynamics, and will enhance variation through the year.

KEEPING WITHIN BOUNDS

A stone balustrade edging (top) helps bring structure to the border and keeps the vegetation confined. Behind it, the plants can be riotous without spoiling the severe line. In the foreground, a tall red Lobelia hybrid brings a shock of colour, behind which penstemons, double pink argyranthemums and Gauna lindheimeri create a breezy summer mood.

Nearly clipped box hedging (above) confines the plants and makes a straight line along the edge. Perennials flopping over hedges could cause damage by over-laying, but the golden astrotanias in the foreground will soon be over and can be cut back. Phlox and Hemerocallis help to provide the rest of the colour, and there are sedums to follow for autumn.