Plants available to gardeners offer a huge choice of colours, differing flower shapes and varying leaf textures, making it possible to create almost any mood or style. Each border has its own special signature and its own particular qualities. This early-summer display is unusually light in overall tone, but still rich in colour. Yellow and white mulemns – mostly Verbascum chaixii – white Shasta daisies, soft yellow roses and dark bronze irises have joined forces with Strychnium strychnicum, achilleas and a silver and yellow lambium to create a pale, gentle effect for early summer.

Much of the foliage is also suffused with pale, silvery grey, rather than green, having the effect of desaturating the colour even further. The pink cranesbills flowers in the foreground make a modest contribution, but their running stems and deeper-green, prettily lobed leaves contribute greatly by contrasting with the silveriness of the other foliage.

Later, when the mulemns have gone to seed, this border will quieten down in colour, and will need other plants to come into bloom for an autumn reprise.
VARIATIONS ON A CONSTANT THEME

Colour can run short in mid to late summer, but certain valuable species will help to bridge the gap. Echinacea purpurea ‘White Swan’ for example, is at its best in August, just before the autumn floral flourish begins. Here at RHS Garden Wisley, this cultivar blends perfectly into the warm colour scheme and closely-related Rudbeckia fulgida var. deamii behind has much in common with the echinaceas. The colour and shape of the central cones in both plants tends to harmonise, creating a repeating pattern. Grasses and kniphofias, though sparse in this shot, will also make their own strong contribution, bringing contrasting shapes and textures, as well as harmonising with the colour theme of bronze, gold, yellow-green and brown.

BORDER PRACTICALITIES

Traditionally, herbaceous borders were heavily manured, cut back in autumn and dug over annually. Such practices are out of kilter with ecologically sound gardening today, and are hard work – paid gardeners are rare. A more eco-friendly approach is to lift and divide individual perennials only when necessary, never to cut borders back until early spring, and to feed sparingly, if at all, adding a mulch of compost every year. Plants grow less vigorously, but need less staking, and are not as susceptible to disease.

It is equally futile to attempt to force something into flower every month since, to a great extent, one is in the hands of the season. Spring is easy, since early foliage can be beheaded up with bulbs and spring perennials. In summer, the first big pulse comes just after the Chelsea Flower Show, with Oriental poppies, lupins and other flowers responding to the lengthening days.

July will go green, so rejoice in that, making sure that foliage is fresh, and that there are enough highlight plants to sustain things until the later summer flourish, when short-day plants begin to bloom. Winter can be helped through with such dark-day measures as hellebores, bergeries, heucheras and early-flowering pulmonarias. And, regardless of colour schemes, winter aconites and snowdrops are welcome, without exception, absolutely everywhere.

Flower borders, like Rome, cannot be built in a day. Apart from normal maintenance, they will benefit from constant adjustment. Gertrude Jekyll was said to have fine-tuned her borders at Munstead Wood, Surrey for more than 40 years. Even the best maintained and most exquisitely composed plantings are always going to demand frequent overhauls. The fact that they provide such a constant run of new planting opportunities, and that they respond so readily – sometimes quite unexpectedly – to alterations, is what makes flower borders such an enjoyable part of everyday gardening.

NIGEL COLBORN is a writer, broadcaster and regular panellist on BBC Radio 4’s Gardeners’ Question Time.

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