

Making a MIXED BORDER

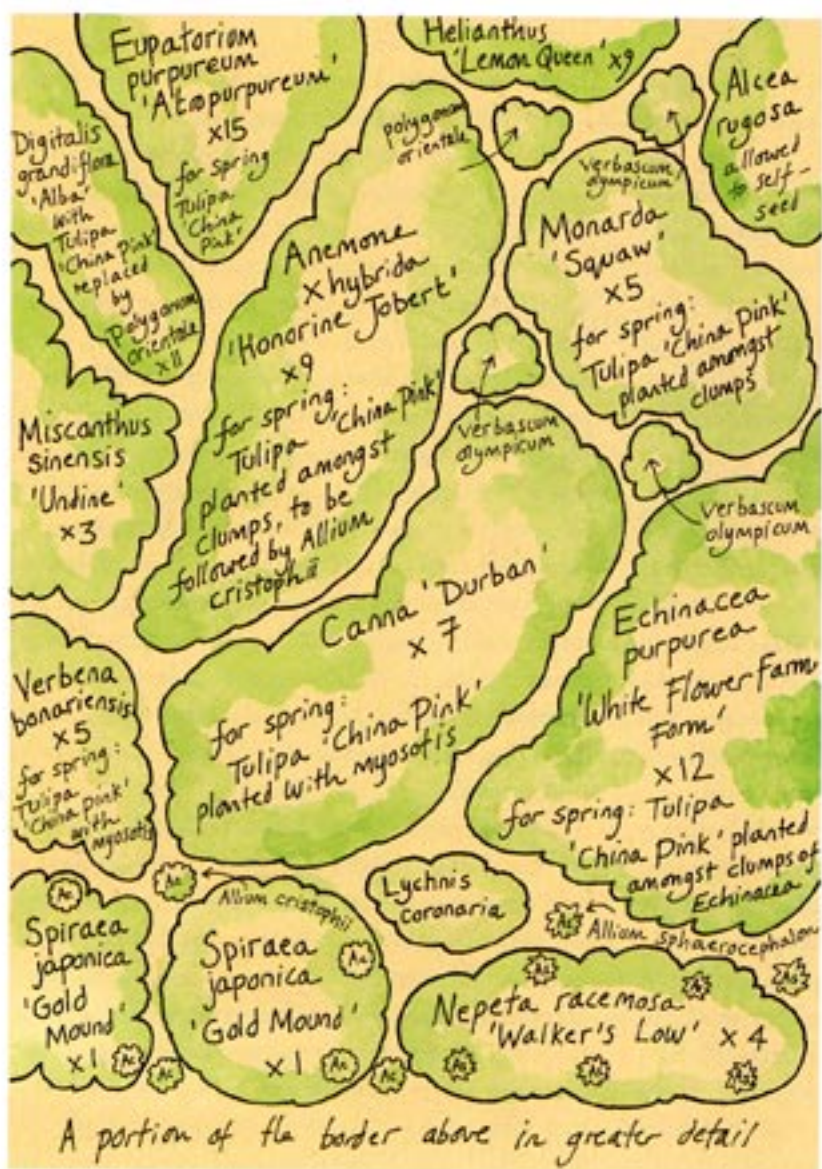
How do you go about building a new garden from scratch? In this and following issues we follow the planning and planting of a major new design. Fergus Garrett

WHETHER YOU'RE WORKING as a professional, amateur, or simply for yourself, no matter how large or small a border or garden you're planning, the process of design is more or less the same. The formulation of ideas into a successful plan relies first of all on good communication between the designer and the client (who may be the other members of your family). "Why?" is always a good question to ask of all aspects of a design. Thorough questioning should go hand in hand with good research. Always make yourself as familiar as you can with the site and the people involved. This will give you a solid foundation on which to base your design. The importance of a sense of place should never be underestimated. Spend as much time as possible studying the site—in different seasons and at different times of day. Make efforts to see what's growing in any adjacent gardens on the property and in the landscape at large, as these will give you immediate clues to the growing conditions you're faced with.

All these thoughts came quickly to mind when it was suggested that I take on the design of a large new border at White Flower Farm, the mail-order nursery in Litchfield, Connecticut. My first thought was of the climate. Many of the plants common to me in our cozy USDA Zone 7 at Great Dixter in southeast England would not cope with the harsher, Zone 5 Connecticut winters, and those that could might behave in an unfamiliar way. On the other hand, my mind filled instantly with visions of the exciting plants

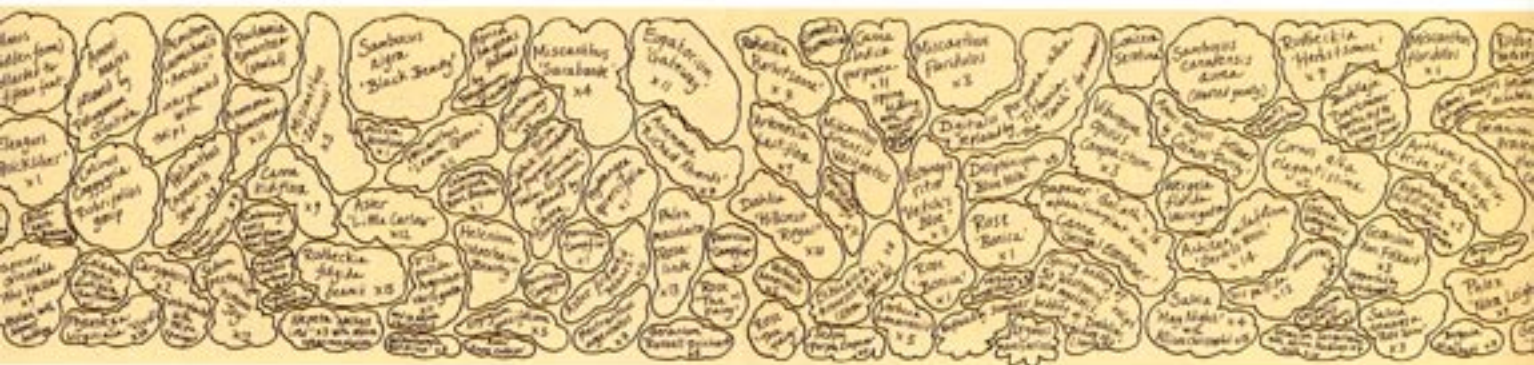
and combinations, of trees, shrubs, bulbs, and annuals, with climbers trailing through, and self sowers that flourish in the hot and sunny (by our standards) Connecticut summers adding the informality and looseness that every border should have. I immediately thought of the long border at Great Dixter, which is the most highly evolved and by far the best mixed border that I know. Wouldn't it be great to create a similar border in the States, starting with a fresh canvas and using really exciting plants? The planting could be intensive, with pockets of bedding integrated into it in true mixed border style. The long hot summers could be to my advantage in allowing me to flower a range of plants that don't get sufficient heat in England. Before long, I could feel my head spinning with ideas as I got totally carried away. But first I had a great deal of research to do. I had little idea of the site, the soil, the relevance of the border, or the various other design issues that are involved in the creation of any garden, large or small.

I had several questions to ask. The first on my list—the first question for anyone thinking about a new border—was why a border was needed and for what purpose? In this case the border would serve as the main focal point of the gardens, positioned bang in the middle of the grounds and also act as a shop window for the nursery. I had to study the site before knowing exactly where it would be but realized that it needed to be of considerable stature to fulfill this role. A wide range of plants would be



In true mixed border fashion, this design uses all types of plants—trees and shrubs for year-round structure, bulbs (as bedding or interspersed among other plants), tender and hardy herbaceous plants for summer color.





Reflecting the surrounding northeastern landscape, the border makes generous use of all sorts of daisies for high summer and beyond. Dahlias echo this theme, adding their exotic personality to the display.



No garden can be at its best all the time, so it's a good idea to aim for one or two particular peaks. In the case of this border, the goal is to reach a climax in midsummer.

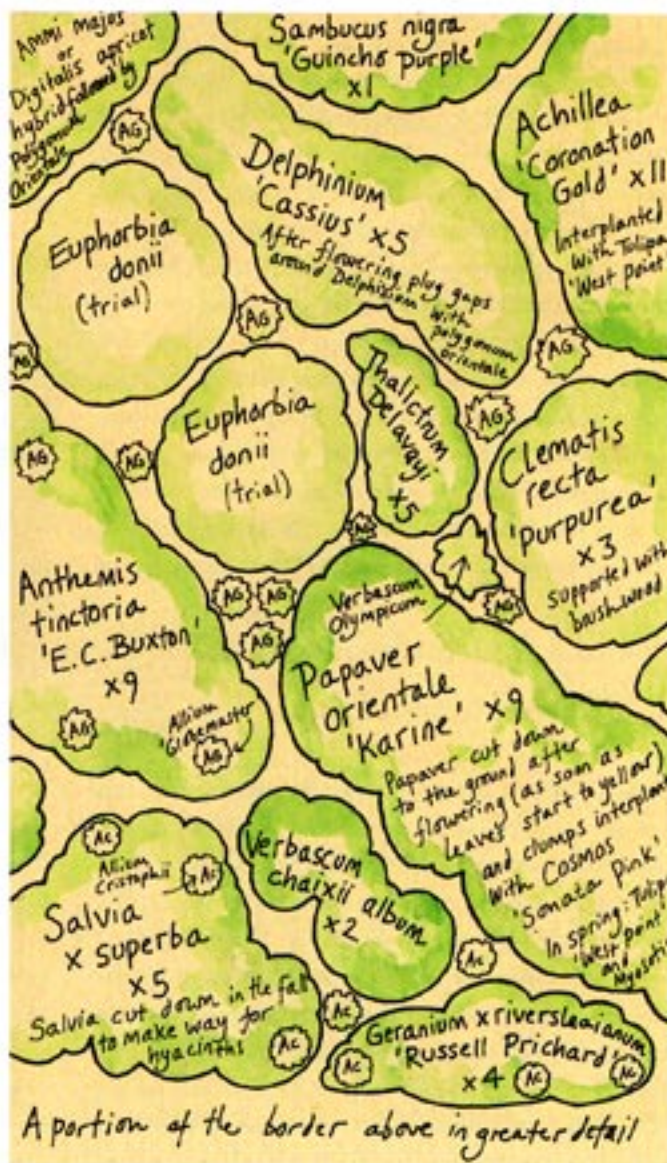




Lonicera caerulea
ripening to seed



The sculptural seedheads of plants such as money plant and alliums can extend the interest of a border, but their progeny need monitoring, lest they swamp their neighbors.



shown off in exciting combinations to stimulate interest among visitors.

My second question dealt with plant choice. There would obviously be limits on the plants I could use due to environmental and climatic factors, but were there to be any other restrictions that would limit the choice of plants? The answer was that I could have a free hand except I should try to use the tried and tested plants from the nursery's own lists. These would give me surefire reliability, but experimenting was certainly to be encouraged.

Next, I had to find out what style of border it should be. Was it to be formal or informal? Color themed—hot, cold, or pastel? What form did they want the border to take? Did they want a big island bed, a series of beds, or one big, long border?

Again the answers were straightforward. First of all the border would sit on a south-facing slope, on acidic soil at pH5; it could stretch up to 340 feet in one swoop or be a series of connecting borders. Its exact position and dimensions would be up to me. A summer-peaking herbaceous border with a long season was suggested with no restrictions on color. I had to keep in mind, however, that the site is on a farm in a rural area, so a formal scheme might be slightly out of



visit, a very rough plan began to take shape in my mind. It was exciting, but I knew it was only a start. No matter how thorough and detailed a plan you make, there are bound to be adjustments when it comes to planting. Anyway, a plan should never be fixed. Making changes as you go along is often a good thing. And of course the border will change and evolve from year to year as planting is edited and additions are made.

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place. Of course an informal border suits me fine, but I prefer a mixed border to one that is strictly herbaceous because the former has no limitations on the plant material one can use and has structure in the off-season from trees and shrubs.

In November of 2000, I spent a day at White Flower Farm, studying the site proposed for the border as well as the general surroundings. (I had already spent hours studying past, present, and future plant lists from the catalogs.) I took plenty of photographs and made many notes. And by the end of my

The border was laid out this past summer, and the slate walk along the border's front edge was installed. The initial planting will take place this spring and the following fall, each time looking for gaps and fine tuning. It's this process of adding layer after layer that has given the borders at Great Dixter so much depth. Looking after the new border will require a highly skilled person, someone who's practical but also sensitive in the management of what will eventually be a very complex piece of planting. But what an exciting challenge it will be! ♡