

the guardian

# WEEKEND

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**DEREK  
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AND  
KATE  
GARRAWAY**

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# Remains of the day

Even this late in the year, there is much to enjoy as grasses and perennials fade away. Andy Sturgeon finds a garden where autumn brings its own special beauty. Pictures by Clive Nichols

"Some things just don't die well," admits Graham Gough, "but take *Cephalaria gigantea*, the giant yellow scabious, now that's very good at it." And as his garden, near Lewes in East Sussex, gently slides into winter, he describes his minimal input at this time of year as "managing decay". "If you don't cut everything back, it's amazing what the winter garden looks like. When you leave the plants alone, they can sometimes surprise you."

The blackened seedheads of a rudbeckia silhouetted against a small pampas grass is, for Gough, one of the recent highlights, and he also draws my attention to a tall miscanthus grass, foliage turning a soft parchment colour as its green lifeblood slips away. "I love the breakdown at this time of year, with the bleached colours," he says.

Gough lives with Lucy Goffin, a textile artist, in their Victorian cottage, which presides over a two-acre plot shaped like an elongated triangle with its nose cut off. For 200m the ground gently falls away from the house, pointing towards the dramatic ridge of the South Downs that fills the panorama.

This open site, with its 180 degree views, is reminiscent of the big skies of the African savannah, and this dramatic setting is key to the whole garden. The slope allows you to look down on to the tops of the planting, so you see a mass of hundreds of different flowering perennials and grasses laid out in a tapestry of colour and texture. The effect is big and dramatic, and it needs to be if



the many head-high plants are not to be dwarfed by the landscape.

Even at this time of year, it's amazing the amount of colour the grasses provide, and there are brighter, more intense pinpoints of colour from the mauve asters and *Kniphofia linearifolia*, a soft orange poker which is only just reaching the end of its prime. The different textures, tints and tones give this garden a real depth and quality that changes constantly with the weather, the time of day, and as it glides into winter. You could stand and gaze at it for hours.

The garden is broadly south-facing and has almost no shade, so there is plenty of light, even at the gloomier times of year. "The ornamental grasses depend on it," says Gough. "On sunny autumn days, they have a magical glow that has visitors drooling, and after rain the colours just keep on intensifying."

But the downside to this open landscape is a total lack of shelter,

and Goffin's influence is evident in the unusual windbreaks. A slatted fence, for example, has an undulating top inspired by the backdrop. "It was a moment of inspiration when we took the downland profile as our template," says Gough. The hornbeam hedge behind it stands a little higher, like piping on the edge of fabric. "It's a textile issue," notes Gough. "Our areas of work feed each other on a subconscious level."

But this garden is about atmosphere, not details. There are no grand vistas, no clichéd focal points, and although the design is strong, it is subtle, relying on colour and textures from the plants themselves.

Two arrow-straight gravel paths march through the densely planted garden and, in the centre, is a raised grassy mound. A bench seat at the end faces toward Mount Caburn, the highest part of the Downs, and in the centre a hornbeam hedge spirals up and encircles a ring of molinia. "There's a sort of organic thought to everything so the garden sits snugly in the landscape."

Both consider the garden an amalgam of everything they have seen and done, and garden with an artist's eye. Vivid pink *Salvia involu-crata* 'Bethelii' and orangey yellow *Crocsmia x crocosmiiflora* 'Queen Alexandra' evoke memories of travel in India, seeing saris lying on a bank to dry. "I find colour exciting and liberating," says Gough. "I paint with plants and I'd love to be able to use colour like Matisse in the garden, but not in big doses in case they

Late developers: Spiny grasses such as *Panicum vergatum* 'Nine' set off the plum-coloured seedheads of *Phlomis russeliana*. Left: Graham Gough and Lucy Goffin



compete with the landscape.”

Gough trained as a classical singer before moving into horticulture. For 17 years, he worked at Washfields Nursery, in Kent, and in 1998 came here to start Marchants Hardy Plants, which has built up a reputation for unusual perennials and grasses. The garden was carved out of the unpromising clay soil a few years later, and acts as both his trial ground and shop window.

At this time of year, the nursery winds down and he and Goffin get more time to work on the garden, renewing beds, digging in cow manure to improve the poorly drained clay, and nursing his legions of perennials as they gracefully die. Unusual combinations include tall *Sanguisorba* with *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Ghana’, which was one of the first plants in the garden to show its autumn colour, turning a glowing rusty brown at least three weeks ago. A low mound of *Fuchsia magellanica* ‘Thompsonii’ continues to flower profusely alongside the squirrel-tailed flowers of *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Herbstzauber’.

As we walk past plant after plant, many unusual and many bred here by Gough himself, this walking catalogue champions them all. Even at this time of year, when many gardens have been cleared and put to rest for winter, there is so much to admire.

#### AGEING GRACEFULLY

Plants that fade beautifully include: *Aster lateriflorus* ‘Lady in Black’ – dark foliage and small lilac flower heads. *Miscanthus* ‘Kleine Fontane’ – soft pink flowers that fade to beige. *Rudbeckia maxima* – one of many corolla flowers that hold their almost black central cones long after the yellow petals have fallen. *Agapanthus inerpertus* – stiff upright stems that turn yellow and keep their seedheads for some time. *Sanguisorba officinalis* – almost bullet-shaped, dark maroon seedheads that turn black and look amazing silhouetted against the sky. *Miscanthus* ‘Ferner Osten’ – mounds of foliage that turns bright copper and red before fading; the flower plumes are very dark red and spectacular.