

Mauve flowers of catmint and strong purple spikes of *Salvia* 'Caradonna' contrast with zesty lime-green euphorbia.

PICTURE PERFECT

Garden designer Nic Howard explains how to create borders in his signature style: a dreamy confection of mauves and purples

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PHOTOGRAPHS **MMGI/BENNET SMITH**



Above Shades of lilac and lavender flowers with complementary silver foliage and deeper purple tones have become a signature look for designer Nic Howard.

Surrey-based garden designer Nic Howard has become well known for his romantic plant-filled gardens, which he's been creating for clients across Surrey, Kent and Sussex since establishing his business in 2001. And if just one colour palette has become associated with his gardens, it's dreamy shades of mauve, blue and purple. In a way, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, he explains: "Soft pastels are often the clients' preference, and then new clients see our work and love what we do and want that look. In my early days my planting was more experimental, but then a certain style gains momentum."

Having recreated the style for clients across lots of gardens, Nic has honed this colour-themed planting palette to perfection. "It's developed to be self-supporting for ease of maintenance and for biodiversity – almost all of the plants I use are nectar-rich to provide food for bees – and I'm always conscious of providing plenty of interest across the seasons," Nic says.

In this Surrey garden, Nic's client wanted "a really pretty, lovely, flowery garden that she could sit in", he recalls. "The site's always windy, and she wanted somewhere sheltered," Nic explains. "She also has five horses, and she said she always wanted to be able to see them from the house. We developed an oak-framed building as an entertaining area that's central to the garden and we readdressed the dividing boundaries between front and back gardens to make more sense. Now the garden sits beautifully around the house, which is a pretty building that felt quite functional before. It's absolutely transformed how she uses the property. Before, when she entertained they used to bury themselves around the back of the house away from all those views. Now they're sitting centrally in the garden, always near the horses.

"We've kept all the planting quite close to the house so when you're inside, you look across it," he continues. "The furthest reaches of the garden are lawn and perennial meadow with a lot of ox-eye daisies and ragged robin."

NIC HOWARD'S *Plant Palette*

Stalwart perennials such as geraniums combine with roses, all in complementary shades



Geranium **'Orion'**
Ideal as groundcover with masses of Prussian-blue saucer-shaped flowers above mounds of finely divided foliage.



Nepeta racemosa **'Walker's Low'**
Grey-green foliage and stems of deep violet flowers, which bees adore, from early summer. Forms clumps 60cm tall.



Rosa **'Ballerina'**
This compact hard-working rose is smothered in pale pink and white flowers in summer. Reaches up to 1.2m.



Salvia **'Nachtvlinder'**
This shrubby salvia that's hardy in most of the UK bears its spikes of mulberry-purple flowers from June to August.



Stachys byzantina **'Big Ears'**
A vital foliage foil in Nic's schemes, lamb's ear spreads to fill gaps with soft silver leaves and spikes of pink flowers.



Phlomis tuberosa **'Amazone'**
Dark green toothed leaves and summer flower spikes with whorls of lilac flowers at intervals up their 1m-plus stems.



Salvia nemorosa **'Caradonna'**
Garden designers' go-to plant for its structural dark purple flowers; the more you repeat it, the better it looks.



Geranium **'Brookside'**
One of the prettiest hardy geraniums with violet-blue flowers in early summer and attractive foliage on 50cm mounds.



Penstemon **'Dark Towers'**
Used by Nic for its handsome burgundy-purple foliage, as well as its contrasting pale pink flowers. Reaches 70-80cm.



Above *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' enlivens the planting with its orange flowers: a joyful surprise that brings out the best in the purple tones of the plants around it.

The mauve and purple colour theme is used across all the planting in this garden. In the beds nearest to the house, though, bright bursts of orange and magenta enliven the mix and complement the warm tones of the tile-hung property.

A swathe of dark purple *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' catches the eye first, but Nic sounds a note of caution. "They've really suffered through wet winters, so now I don't use them unless a garden has free-draining sandy soil," he explains. Hardy geraniums, on the other hand, are "bombproof", he notes. He uses a range of mauve and blue-flowered cultivars including 'Orion', 'Brookside' and 'Eureka Blue'. "We also use 'Rozanne' even though it's sterile so not as good for bees, but it fills that awkward mid-to late-summer gap and it's a really good one to use if you want that shade of geranium-blue."

The mauve catmint Nic uses here is *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' – or you could use 'Junior Walker'. It's ideal for conjuring a sense of billowing informality and romance, plus its flowers are loved by pollinators. It tones beautifully with the spikes of the salvia and echoes the mauve-blue hardy geranium flowers, knitting the planting scheme together.

Then comes the contrast. Magenta-flowered hardy *Geranium* 'Dragon Heart' sprawls its way around other plants to fill gaps with its divided foliage and vibrant pink flowers, each with a central black eye. *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' delivers the perfect contrast to purple with its elegantly tall flower stems



1 Architectural *Phlomis tuberosa* 'Amazone' with its whorls of mauve flowers. **2** *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' adds fresh, zesty bursts of citrus-orange. **3** *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' is a go-to plant, but it needs good drainage to thrive and dislikes heavy wet soil during winter. **4** *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' billows across paths to soften edges and is great for pollinators. **5** *Geranium* 'Dragon Heart' is Nic's choice for bright magenta pink. **6** *Geranium* 'Brookside' has nodding mauve-blue flowers that open into saucers as the sun rises.

of citrus-orange. "Again, 'Totally Tangerine' is sterile, so it's not ideal from a biodiversity point of view, but it does add that long season of pops of colour," Nic says.

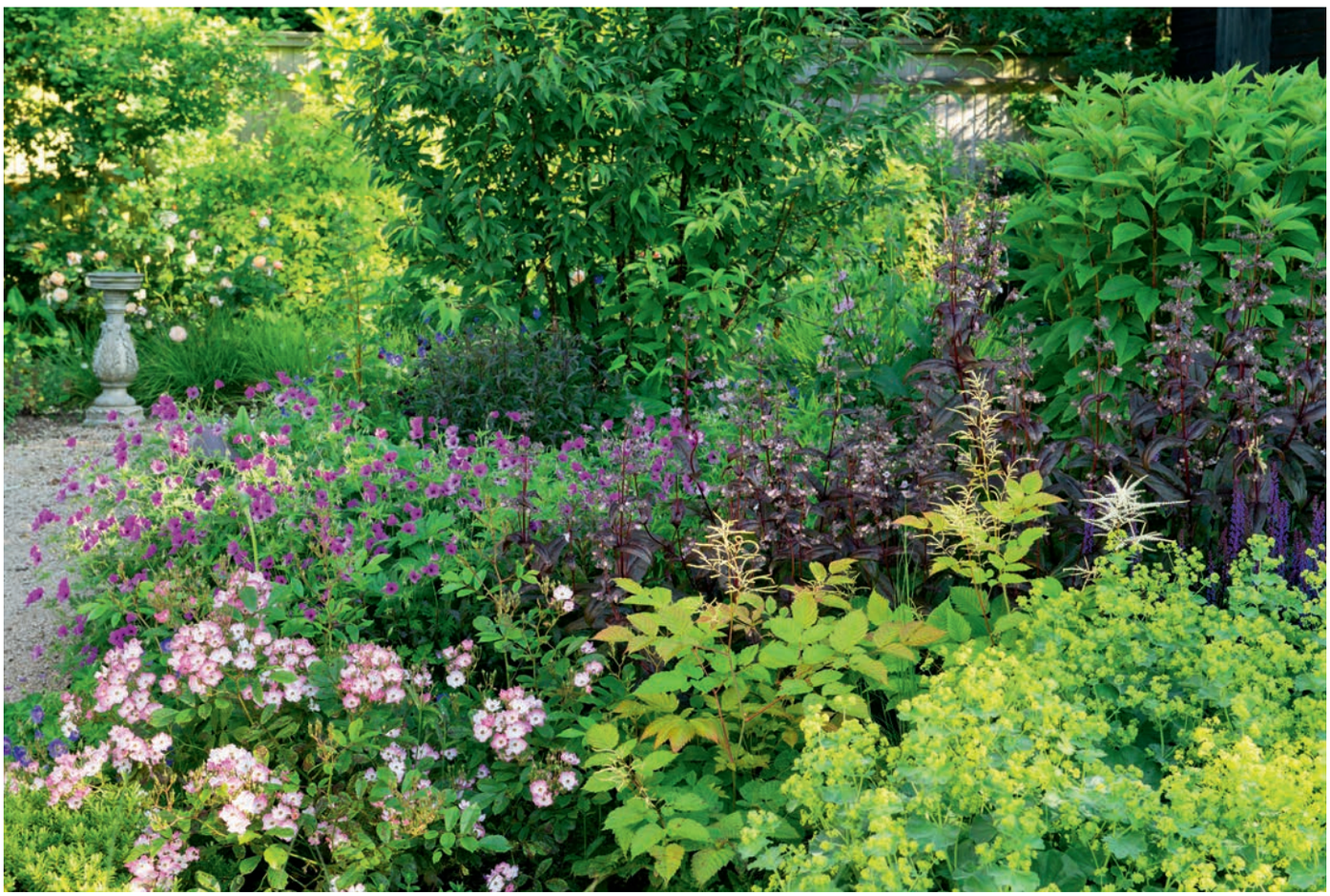
Earlier in the season, there are peonies in the mix. "There are the big blowsy ones, but we like to use the ones with more open flowers such as *Paeonia* 'White Wings', 'Jan van Leeuwen' and 'Bowl of Beauty'. They're great for bees, plus if we get spring rains, the bigger, fuller cultivars like 'Sarah Bernhardt' tend to just dive bomb and end up on the soil," Nic says.

Among all the flowers, there's a "backbone" of foliage interest. "*Stachys byzantina* 'Big Ears', grasses such as *Sesleria autumnalis*, *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, which is really good for a neat, fountain-like effect, pennisetums... There's a whole mix of stuff so you're not just relying on flower, flower, flower," Nic explains. "*Aruncus* 'Horatio' is fantastic for foliage, and you get the lovely feathery flowers around May and June time." *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* is in the mix, as are bearded iris, which are as valuable for their sword-like upright leaves as their flouncy flowers. Trees that cast only dappled shade anchor the scheme, and include *Acer campestre* and *Betula nigra* 'Heritage'.

"The soil here is heavy clay so we did a lot of soil improvement using composted green waste, and the beds have a slight dome on them, they're not just flat, which helps raise the plants out of the water table. We plant in threes and fives, and that's repeated in groups of five or seven throughout the space, so there are always repeats happening as you look across. The spacing is probably 50-60cm per plant, or their ultimate spread. With the big grasses, at planting there's a big hole, and we say 'just wait, it's going to be massive!' You have to allow room for the plants to do their thing."



Left Plants such as *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' are repeated from border to border, drawing the eye across the garden.



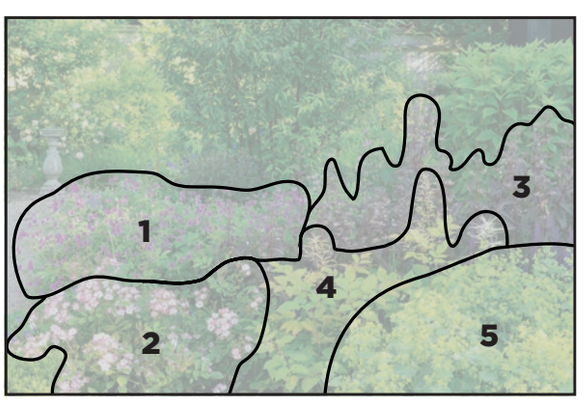
Above Pinks and zesty lime-greens are the dominant colours in this part of the garden.

Nic and his team return every couple of months to maintain the borders, which are designed to be low-maintenance. "We'll go in February or March and cut everything back, and then we might go back again in May to perform a Chelsea chop and cut back the geraniums and tellimas," he says. A visit in late summer, July or August, might see Nic doing another chop of any perennials getting tired, such as the 'Caradonna' salvias and the nepetas – "so when the clients get back from a summer holiday, the garden will still be looking good in September and October," he explains.

In the border shown above, a long season of colour is guaranteed. Partly that's through Nic's choice of plants with an impressively long flowering period. *Geranium* 'Dragon Heart', for example, blooms continuously from June through to September. *Rosa* 'Ballerina', meanwhile, produces its trusses of flowers nonstop for the same period of time.

Then there are plants that look good over more than one season of interest. Purple-leaved *Penstemon* 'Dark Towers' adds intrigue from the moment its shoots emerge, and this is only added to by the time its pink flowers open in midsummer, plus they last until the middle of autumn. *Aruncus* 'Horatio' flowers in early summer, but its foliage also makes a contribution in autumn when it develops coral and red tones before dying back.

Finally, Nic makes sure plants work as hard as possible through cultivation techniques. *Alchemilla mollis* produces its zesty froth from late spring, but can be encouraged to do so again with a cut back after the first flowers fade, as can hardy geraniums.



1 Long-flowering *Geranium* 'Dragon Heart' romps around filling gaps and suppressing weeds. **2** *Rosa* 'Ballerina' flowers for ages, and blooms are followed by small orange hips in autumn. **3** *Penstemon* 'Dark Towers' is a double-whammy plant with its dramatic foliage and long season of flowers. **4** *Aruncus* 'Horatio' delivers frothy flowers and leafy interest. **5** Chop *Alchemilla mollis* back after flowering to maximise its display.







Grasses are key to this scheme having longevity throughout the year. "There are a lot of grasses," says Nic. "Miscanthus comes out later, there's *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, *Molinia* 'Transparent' and 'Heidebraut'. The grasses move in the wind which is absolutely fantastic – it's become a really sensory garden thanks to that sound element." In one section of the garden, the golden flowerheads of *Stipa gigantea* quiver in the breeze above the tapestry of perennials.

He's taken care to ensure more floral colour later in the year, too. *Vernonia arkansana* 'Mammuth' is included in the mix, as is the towering perennial eupatorium, or Joe Pye weed and sedums (or hylotelephium as they're now known). "Pink 'Ballerina' and white 'Kew Gardens' roses repeat flower as well, so they'll still be producing flowers in August-September time, when things can be a bit flat on the flower front," Nic says.

Above left Small now, in a few months these grasses will tower over the border to add interest for autumn. **Top right** *Stipa gigantea* is large, but its airiness gives it a light touch. **Above right** *Aruncus* 'Horatio' with *Penstemon* 'Dark Towers': two plants with long seasons.

Three key 'rules' combine to create this cohesive, polished look. First, stick to a consistent, complementary colour palette, but don't be afraid to enliven it with a hit of vibrant contrast like Nic does with his orange and magenta accent plants. Second, choose plants with a succession of interest that will take you through the year – and make sure that within that mix are plants that look good for more than one season so they work doubly hard. Third, repeat those plants throughout your border to achieve that confident, unified look, and your planting will look just like that of the pros. ■

For more information about Nic Howard's practice, call 01883 744020 or visit *we-love-plants.co.uk*