

Planted with panache

The Dragon Garden at Knoll features a sculpture of the mythical beast at the centre of a circular pool. Surrounding beds are planted with grasses including *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars 'Malepartus', 'Roland' and 'Hermann Müssel', and with *Cortaderia richardii* AGM.

His golden touch

At Knoll Gardens, an RHS Partner Garden in Dorset, Neil Lucas has developed a relaxed, naturalistic style using ornamental grasses, which really shine as the trees and shrubs develop vibrant autumnal hues

Author: Stephanie Mahon, garden writer. Photography: John Campbell



Noms de plume

Compact pampas grass *Cortaderia selloana* 'Pumila' AGM, plus *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars 'Malepartus' and 'Hermann Müssel' glow in warm morning sun.

Fallen but unbowed giant

In the Water Garden a huge fallen *Eucalyptus chapmaniana* continues to grow, shedding its bark, skirted by Japanese forest grass *Hakonechloa macra* AGM. Large-leaved *Gunnera manicata* and a weeping juniper enjoy the shady, damp conditions.



Late-season colour symphony

The Long Walk is framed by orange-leaved *Koelreuteria paniculata*, golden *Gymnocladus dioica* and red *Euonymus hamiltonianus* subsp. *sieboldianus*. At lower left, variegated pampas grass mingles with *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Amethyst', *Hylotelephium telephium* 'Karfunkelstein' AGM and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Heidezwerg'. On the right, *Miscanthus x giganteus* towers over *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' AGM and scarlet *Nandina domestica* 'Fire Power'.

The secret to creating an intriguing garden, says Neil Lucas, is kidology – the art of hiding things from sight, then revealing a delightful view: tricking the eye; leading you down a path with teasing glimpses; unexpected surprises around every corner. ‘You want to give that feeling of being somewhere else, a space that’s a bit special,’ he says. This has been his triumph at Knoll Gardens and nursery in Dorset, which has been captivating visitors for some 26 years.

The site was once a market garden, before becoming the Wimborne Botanic Gardens under plantsman John May, who planted many trees and shrubs that now lend maturity to the garden. It was then a formal garden for several years; ‘Not really my style,’ Neil says, diplomatically. He, a gardener, and his parents (former hoteliers) took it on in 1994.

Applying a new ethos

Neil immediately dug up the bedding plants, prim little hedges and lawns, and over the years has developed a freer, more naturalistic style, creating different areas using plants suited to the growing conditions. His aim was to make a beautiful and sustainable garden that requires few resources and little labour to thrive – low input, but high impact.

And on impact it certainly delivers: a journey round the garden is an immersive experience in a series of engrossing tableaux. Get lost exploring Mill End Border, rubbing shoulders with statuesque perennials that reach over your head. Watch dragonflies dip across the Dragon Garden, where swaths of sun-kissed grasses lap around a central pool in golden waves. Duck under a huge storm-toppled eucalyptus tree that straddles the jungly green Water Garden: ‘Just because it’s fallen over, it sees no reason not to continue growing... sideways,’ says Neil.

There are many other characterful spaces to enjoy, including the Stream Garden and Damp Garden that burst with colour in spring, and the Gravel Garden flush with *Oenothera lindheimeri* AGM and *Scabious* in summer. One area is being developed as an experimental dry meadow that Neil hopes will look good from April to autumn, when the garden hits its high note. For while other gardens are being put to bed, Knoll is reaching a crescendo, thanks to its foundation of ornamental grasses.

‘Grasses are one of the most successful groups of plants on the planet,’ Neil says. ‘There are grasses for almost every situation – sun or shade, wet or dry. As well as being tough, durable and beautiful in detail, they bring light and movement to any style of

planting.’ But as much as Knoll and Neil are known for grasses, he is quick to point out the success of this garden is down to its diversity of plants. ‘It relies on all the layers. Using all the plants together creates the best result. Woody plants are essential; with them, autumn is a real extravaganza.’

Nowhere is this more true than the Long Walk and neighbouring Decennium Border at the centre of the garden, where a dazzling display of blazing scarlet, copper and gold foliage, late-season flowers and ethereal, honey-blond grasses unfolds from September to November. But even when the leaves have fallen from the trees, the grasses continue to provide texture, structure – and breathtaking backlit beauty on frosty days.

‘The objective is to cover the ground for as long as possible with foliage, flower and form,’ says Neil. ‘We leave the borders intact over winter because it looks nice, is less work and is good for wildlife.’ From late winter into spring, the staff work area by area, chopping things down using long-handled hedge trimmers, and leaving the clippings on the ground.

He says people are often concerned about how to care for grasses, but it’s quite simple. Deciduous types can be left over winter, and cut down in February or March, but this is not a golden rule. ‘If they are becoming untidy, chop them down earlier – it won’t hurt the plants.’

With evergreen grasses, it isn’t necessary to cut them back, but you can comb them through with your fingers (wearing gloves to avoid cuts) or a rake in early spring to get rid of old foliage. Cut individual flowered stems after blooming on things like *Luzula* (strap-leaved but a wood rush, not a grass). ‘If plants start to look tatty after a few years, trim them while they are actively growing in spring and summer, not while dormant in winter,’ says Neil.

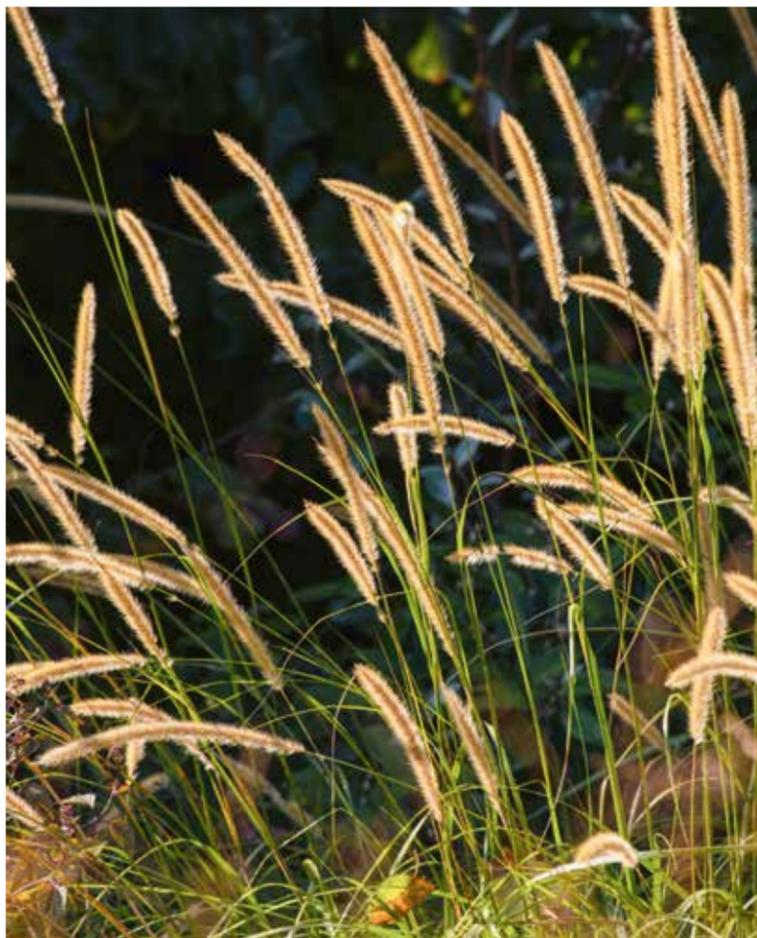
Big grasses such as *Miscanthus* that go soft and weak in the centre after several years on heavy, wet soils should be lifted and split, but aside from this, grasses, and Neil’s choice of no-fuss perennials, do not require much attention – no staking or feeding, rarely extra watering. But that is Neil’s ultimate bit of kidology: his garden looks so good, it is hard to believe how little intervention it requires.

‘It’s most satisfying when you see plants sufficiently happy where they are, looking after themselves with minimal maintenance, needing so little work to look good,’ he says. ‘That’s the ultimate compliment for any gardener.’ ○

Hear Neil Lucas talk to Editor Chris Young about the importance of grasses for autumn in The Garden Podcast: rhs.org.uk/thegardenpodcast

Misty splendour

Where the Long Walk meets the Decennium Border, pampas grass *Cortaderia selloana* ‘Sunningdale Silver’ AGM stands sentry over a gravel path lined with *Verbena bonariensis* AGM and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* ‘Dauerstrahl’. Beyond these, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’ AGM and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* grow, with a red-leaved *Euonymus* seedling Neil intends to name ‘Pillar Box’.



Backlit feathers

The flowerheads of *Pennisetum macrourum* AGM (African feather grass), one of Neil’s National Plant Collection of hardy *Pennisetum*.

Delightful Knoll Gardens



Staplehill Road, Hampreston, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 7ND; 01202 873931; knollgardens.co.uk

Size: around 1.6 hectares (4 acres).

Soil: dry sandy soil with a small belt of clay.

Age: evolved over 50 years.

Style: a naturalistic, sustainable, wildlife-

friendly garden and nursery specialising in ornamental grasses. Holds Plant Heritage National Plant Collection of hardy *Pennisetum*.

Aspect: on a slight slope facing south; has its own microclimate in a frost pocket and summer rain shadow.

Open: until 18 Dec, Tues–Sat 10am–5pm; please check website for current times and access information. Free for RHS members: see *RHS Members’ Handbook 2020*, p106.

Neil’s top grasses for autumn interest:

Molinia caerulea subsp. *caerulea* ‘Dauerstrahl’ for its rich honey colour; *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Dark Desire’ for its flowers, especially when coated in dew; *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Cindy’, a gorgeous compact selection with pink flowers high above foliage; *Sesleria* ‘Greenlee’, a foliage grass, beautiful foil for other plants; and *Carex morrowii* ‘Everglow’, a lovely sedge for shade and one also great for growing in containers.

Two combinations to try at home:

Molinia caerulea subsp. *caerulea* ‘Poul Petersen’ AGM with *Dianthus carthusianorum* backed by *Filipendula rubra* ‘Venusta’ AGM. *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Flamingo’ AGM with *Sanguisorba* ‘Blackthorn’.