

## Designing with herbs for: visual contrast

The easiest way to add impact in plantings is often through foliage and flower contrasts. Here, purple and yellow-orange are used to good effect, with selections of purple basil (*Ocimum basilicum* var. *purpurascens* 'Purple Ruffles') and French marigold (*Tagetes patula* Citrus formula, mixed). The contrast continues with bright green parsley (*Petroselinum crispum* 'Champion Moss Curled') next to the basil; to the left, an evergreen bay (*Laurus nobilis*) gives year-round interest.



# Making more of herbs

No longer just confined to the windowbox, recent displays at RHS Garden Wisley have shown that herbs can pack a punch in flowerbeds as well as in kitchens >>

Author: Oliver Wilkins, Horticulturist and former Fruit, Vegetable and Herb team leader at RHS Garden Wisley. Photography: Tim Sandall

## Herbs

With a resurgence of interest in grow-your-own and a desire to revisit how we display culinary plants at RHS Garden Wisley, some traditional areas of the garden received 'makeovers' last year. In summer 2014 we completed the redevelopment of the Herb Garden that began in 2012 (it now focuses solely on culinary plants), and an eye-catching temporary display of herbs was used as summer bedding in the Walled Garden.

The term 'herbs' encompasses an extremely diverse range of plants, all known to be useful. Herbs can be used for medicine, dyes, or even to deter insects. As gardeners, however, we are often drawn to two main features: floral display and edibility. These principles guided the changes we undertook last summer. The Herb Garden has been gradually transformed, removing old, tired plantings and replacing them with a more intensively managed, productive space that now yields fresh herbs used in the restaurants across the site. The beds have been divided and the plants grouped so as to show how each can be best used in the kitchen – for example, one bed displays herbs for use in teas and infusions, another is made up of herbs for salads.

We wanted to create aesthetically appealing displays as well as productive, informative ones. Designing with herbs is not as challenging as some gardeners seem to think. There is a breadth of choice that includes many plants >>>

### Designing with herbs for: formality

For formal displays, like this 'herbal parterre' in Wisley's Walled Garden last year, use different foliage textures and colours in a patterned arrangement. Here, tall bronze fennel **1** provides the central feature, with purple sage (*Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens') **2** providing the infill and parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) **3** used as fresh, green edging. Dense planting has a greater visual impact and suppresses weeds but the balance needs to be right.



### Herbs for: jams, jellies and cordials

*Pelargonium* leaves can add a subtle flavour when infused in jellies. We use scented-leaf *P. 'Attar Of Roses'*, which is a consistent performer and holds an RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM). Lemon verbena (*Aloysia citriodora*) grows well in the herb garden and is a great addition to a glass (or jug) of Pimm's. For jams think about crab apples such as prolific *Malus* Jelly King ('Mattfru') which has pink fruits that make a jam of the same colour.



### Herbs for: salads

Pictured prominently here are *Viola* flowers, which make a colourful and tasty addition to any salad. Because certain selections are winter hardy, with good planning they can be used year-round. One of my favourites for salads is *Rumex scutatus* 'Silver Shield', a sorrel selection with an amazing citrus twang; and remember you can also eat raw flowers of daylilies (*Hemerocallis*). These are sweet and delicious as well as beautiful (and more substantial than violas).

### Herbs for: meats, fish and marinades

Although they are a renowned combination for a reason, you do not have to be limited to horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*) for beef, dill (*Anethum graveolens*) for fish and mint (*Mentha*) for lamb. Winter savory (*Satureja montana*), a now seldom-used herb, is praised among Wisley chefs for its flavour when added to casseroles and stews. Chopped stems of perennial lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) make a great addition to stuffings for pork and chicken. Lovage and horseradish prefer moist, semi-shaded positions.



### Designing with herbs for: soft texture

Many herbs have profuse, but often overlooked, flowers. Members of the carrot family (*Apiaceae*) such as parsley, dill (*Anethum graveolens*), caraway (*Carum carvi*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) will produce displays of frothy white or yellow flowers. Plant densely, or choose naturally compact selections, to avoid the need for staking.

### Herbs for: teas

Most herbs can be used to make infusions or 'teas', some of which have claims of medicinal benefits. Traditional tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) is more robust than often thought; it can be grown outdoors in the UK in sheltered positions. Teas can be made from the flowers of marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) **1**; from the foliage and flowers of anise hyssop (*Agastache*) **2**, rosemary (*Rosmarinus*) **3** and chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) **4**; or the leaves of lemon verbena (*Aloysia citrodora*) **5**. Rosehips (*Rosa*), leaves of strawberry (*Fragaria*) and roots of liquorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) also make teas, and the leaves and flowers of many herbs are easy to dry.



with attractive foliage shapes and colours, and often-overlooked but attractive flowers. We used both attributes in planning the Herb Garden and in the summer herb bedding in the Walled Garden. For the Walled Garden, we designed a traditional display, using central feature plants and formal edging, in addition to an informal modern planting overflowing with umbel flowers (see p46).

The bedding in the Walled Garden has since been removed but its legacy lives on: herbs are set to infiltrate traditional borders and beds again at Wisley this summer. We have shown that herbs can be grown in any position, and in many contexts. Shady parts of the Herb Garden are filled with meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and sweet violet (*Viola odorata*); we grow mints in semi-shade, which helps restrain their vigour, while Mediterranean herbs such as rosemary and sage get full sun. For height, we use elecampane (*Inula helenium*), fennel or sunflowers; for ground cover and bed edging, Chinese chives (*Allium tuberosum*), thyme or parsley.

There are always new introductions to experiment with. In 2014 we successfully tried Pará cress or electric daisy (*Acmella oleracea*), a mild anaesthetic which makes a fun addition to cocktails or salads, and agretti or barilla plant (*Salsola soda*), which can be forced and is an easier-to-grow alternative to samphire.

Pests and diseases can attack herbs: apart from slugs and snails, the main problems we have had are rust on the onion family, and carrot root fly on carrot family members including parsley and dill – so be vigilant.

Our work at Wisley has highlighted that herbs are more than mere utility plants. Their versatility and ornamental value should earn them favour as rewarding additions to the garden, and they provide a real treat for the kitchen. ●

**More from the RHS** For more on herbs and how to use them in the garden, search 'Herbs' and individual plant names at the RHS website: [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)



Sunflower



Common thyme in flower

#### RHS GARDEN WISLEY HERB GARDEN

The redesigned Herb Garden at RHS Garden Wisley is between the Fruit Garden and the Hilltop. Also at Wisley, the Walled Garden has two seasonal displays each year: in summer and in winter. These areas can be visited during normal garden opening hours.



#### Versatile herbs

Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) growing in a culinary bed. A well-used plant in cooking, it is good for sauces, soups and salads. The bed is edged with *Santolina chamaecyparissus* 'Lambrook Silver', which has scented, disinfectant leaves that can be dried and used as an insect repellent. *Santolina* takes easily from cuttings and makes good hedging.



#### Three AGM sages

Purple *Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens', green/gold-variegated *S. officinalis* 'Icterina' and grey-green, cream and purple-flushed *S. officinalis* 'Tricolor' are fine selections for chopping into sausages, stuffings and fatty foods. Said to be an excellent tonic for digestive and antiseptic purposes, sage can be used for sore throats and ulcers. I cut mine hard back in late spring.

# Herbs at Raveningham Hall

## Raveningham Hall in Norfolk is the home of RHS President Sir Nicholas Bacon and his wife Susan

Author: **Susan Bacon**, Chair of the RHS Herb Group



The Herb Garden at Raveningham (above) has evolved to make use of an area between Victorian kitchen garden walls. In researching early herb gardens, I became enamoured

by the view, common to many cultures, of how plants that are loved and believed in should be valued for their services to man and their beauty. Herbs were often represented in medieval paintings, so as an artist I was naturally drawn to this and their wide range of uses. I planned an Elizabethan format, planting squares mainly with culinary herbs bordered with *Santolina chamaecyparissus*. Triangles of medicinal herbs are edged with rosemary, and the whole is surrounded by old yews.

**More information** For information on the RHS Herb Group, contact Secretary Barbara Segall at: [barbara@bsegall.com](mailto:barbara@bsegall.com) ♣ For a video of Susan Bacon talking about her herbs see: [www.rhs.org.uk/herbs](http://www.rhs.org.uk/herbs)



#### Mints aplenty

I have 11 different mints in one bed, including brook mint (*Mentha longifolia*) and spearmint (*M. spicata*). All are invasive and mix madly so attention is needed (plants can be contained in bottomless buckets). The many uses of mint include chopped fresh into vegetables and salads, used in tisane (said to promote digestive functions) and to flavour drinks.



#### Clary sage and fennel

Biennial clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) has handsome leaves with spikes of mauve flowers, and a lovely rich smell. Bronze fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum') can be used to flavour fish and chicken, and its seeds to flavour breads and stews. Fennel is another plant said to be good for the digestion. The combination of these two plants is one of my favourites.