



# *A plantsman's paradise*

Hermannshof in Germany is no ordinary public park. In the early 1980s it became a trial garden to showcase modern planting ideas and found itself at the forefront of the New Perennial Movement. Over the next six pages we take a detailed look at the planting combinations and reflect on the history of this innovative garden

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## **In brief**

**Name** Hermannshof.  
**What** Private trial and exhibition garden, functioning as a public park.  
**Where** Weinheim, Germany.  
**Soil** Medium to dry, loamy sand (pH 6.9 -7.1).  
**Size** Five and a half acres.  
**Climate** Continental with winters that are slightly cooler than the UK and summers that are hotter.  
**Hardiness rating** USDA 8a.

While many public parks are dominated by large lawns at Hermannshof it's the planting that takes centre stage, with narrow strips of grass winding their way through vast, densely planted borders.

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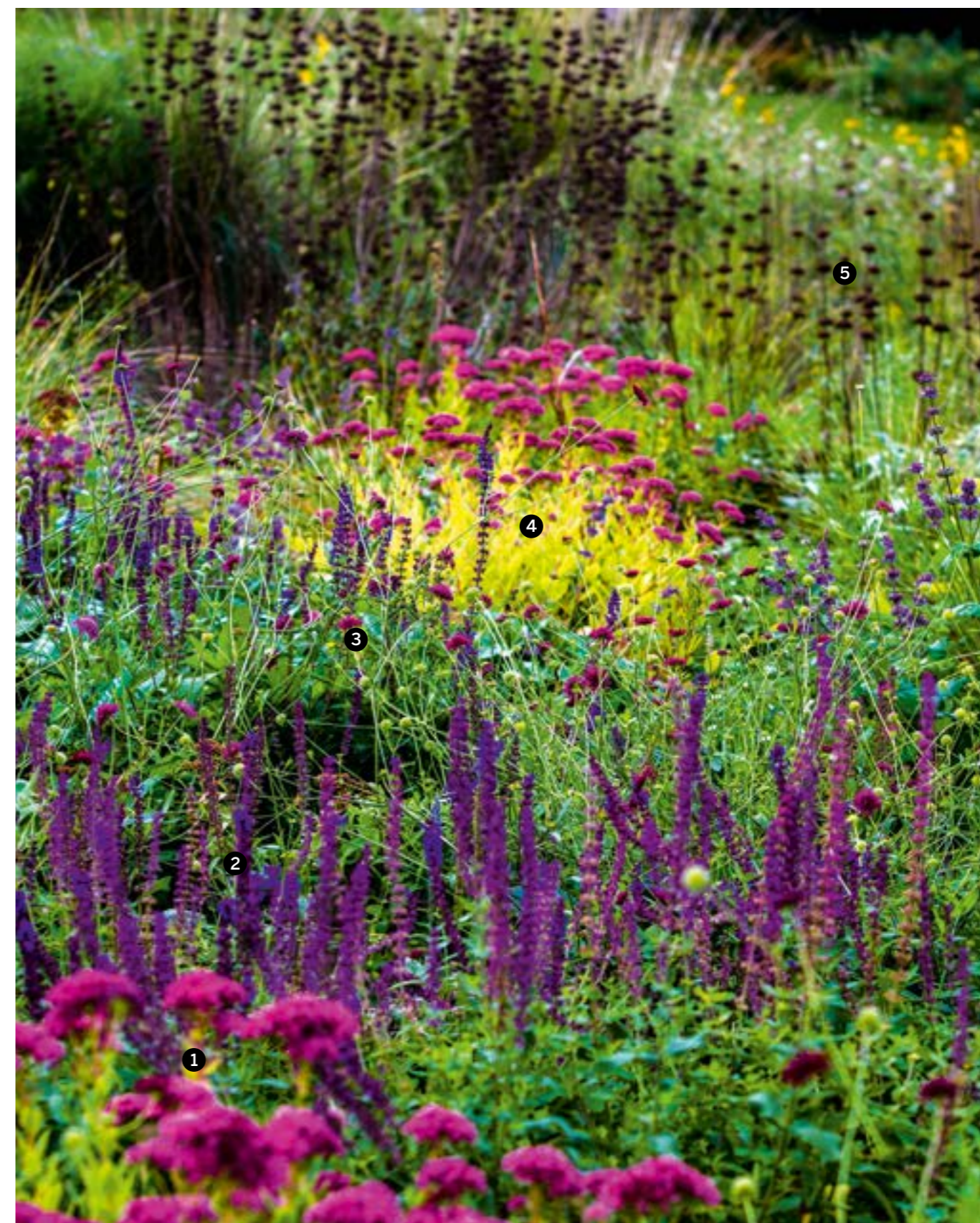




Plant combinations from Hermannshof

Purple prairie

The fresh-green *Aster divaricatus* (1) is one of the few asters that thrives in light shade and is worth growing for the foliage alone. The pink heads of *Eupatorium maculatum* (Atropurpureum Group) 'Riesenschirm' (2) set off the blue *Symphotrichum novi-belgii* 'Stölzle' (3) an old cultivar that is now a rarity, but vigorous and reliable. Behind this is *Calamagrostis brachytricha* (4), a good grass for combining with perennials as its height and narrow shape create an excellent backdrop. The tree is *Sassafras albidum* (5), which turns a fiery orange and yellow later in autumn.



Colour explosion

In one of the oldest plantings at Hermannshof, the vivid pink *Sedum 'Herbstfreude'* (1) rubs up against the sultry purple-blue of *Salvia nemorosa* (2). This flowers in June, but will bloom again in September if cut to ground level after flowering, and its rich colour contrasts well against the pink of the sedum and the deep-magenta scabious, *Knautia macedonica* (3). Behind another clump of *Sedum spectabile* 'Brilliant' is *Phlomis russeliana* (5), which flowers in early summer but retains good, strong seedheads that add interest for the remainder of the year.





### Singing the blues

This area is a 'wet prairie' habitat where colourful asters are given a free rein. The pale aster-like *Boltonia asteroides* var. *latisquama* (1) and the tall grass *Miscanthus sinensis* (2), provide a neutral background against which the rich colour of the asters can shine. The rich blue-purples and pinks you see here are unnamed seedlings of of *Symphotrichum novae-angliae* (3,4,5), a naturally variable aster species. In front is *Spartina pectinata* 'Aureomarginata' (6), an extremely vigorous wetland grass. Behind is a dry area, with a silver-leaved *Santolina chamaecyparissus* (7).



### Bright and beautiful

This colourful border has a fertile, moderately moist soil. The Korean feather reed grass *Calamagrostis brachytricha* (1) gives the whole border a light feel. There's a lively interaction between long-term elements (asters in blues and purples) and short-term elements, such as the non-hardy orange *Dahlia coccinea* (2), which is an annual addition. The deep-blue aster is *Symphotrichum novi-belgii* 'Schöne von Dietlikon' (3), an old and very reliable cultivar from a Swiss nursery, which sits alongside the purple-pink *Symphotrichum novae-angliae* 'Rudelsburg' (4).





It's easy to think of Hermannshof as merely a nice public park, with lawns, borders and big trees. But those borders are heaven for plant lovers, notable not only for the many wonderful and unfamiliar plants they hold, but for the way those plants are arranged in striking combinations at all times of year. Even non gardeners might soon notice there's an awful lot going on in those borders. Ranging from high-energy perennial plantings to more naturalistic combinations, Hermannshof's borders have been designed to suit a host of different habitats: from pond edges to dry, stony areas and all levels of shade.

Combinations is the key word here. The German tradition in planting design is very different to our own. German planting has always been much more about plant communities – an approach that lends itself to a more naturalistic appearance and one that is shown to great effect throughout the borders at Hermannshof.

Once home to the Freudenberg family, who still part-own the gardens and continue to fund them, Hermannshof opened as a trial garden in 1983 following a major redesign by the landscape architect Hans Luz, with planting plans by Urs Wälsler. Wälsler, who became the trial garden's first director, wanted to showcase the principles of planting design developed by Professor Richard Hansen. His idea was to create communities of plants, mostly perennials, that would look naturalistic and provide a long period of interest.

Over time the trial garden has evolved into a glorious public park, now under the directorship of Cassian Schmidt. Cassian took over in 1998, and started by replacing one of the lawns with a large area of prairie-style planting, divided into a series of habitats to reflect the enormous diversity of prairie habitat. More recently, he has created what he calls a 'temperate monsoon forest', inspired by areas of China, Japan and the Russian far east, where rainfall is highest in the summer. "It has an almost subtropical appearance," says Cassian. Here he grows hardy herbaceous aralias, bold-leaved hostas, rodgersias, cimicifugas, arisaemas, autumn anemones, several polygonatum and large-leaved magnolias, with a ground layer of *Hakonechloa macra* and sedges.

In late summer the biggest impact is from the borders near the house with their colourful array of perennials, including asters,

clump-forming, non-invasive goldenrods (*Solidago speciosa*, *S. rigida*, and *S. caesia*), rudbeckias, silphiums, ratibidas and heleniums along with enough large grasses to carry interest well into the winter.

"These are all competitive species, many of them prairie plants," says Cassian, stressing that with so much attention in gardening currently focused on drought-tolerant plants, there has been a tendency to lose interest in plants for averagely moist, fertile borders. "These are long-lived plants," he says, "and can be left for years." There are also smaller areas planted with annuals – mostly with an informal loose-growing habit: dahlias, amaranthus, salvias.

Beneath Hermannshof's beauty there is a serious sense of purpose. Cassian, who is now Professor of Planting Design at Geisenheim University, brings his students here to map out the vegetation and analyse its progress through the seasons. The plant knowledge gained at Hermannshof also feeds into the design of 'Mixed Plantings': planting formulae that are increasingly being used for larger-scale plantings in central and eastern Europe. More than 30 of these mixes, five of which have been designed by Cassian based on prairie species, are now available through wholesale nurseries.

But for Cassian, the greatest importance of Hermannshof lies in its maintenance work. "One of the advantages of having constant financing," he says, "is that we can continually assess and analyse what we do." The garden's six staff members (including one apprentice) keep a careful log of their time so that by the end of the year Cassian can tell how many staff hours per square metre each one of the plantings has taken.

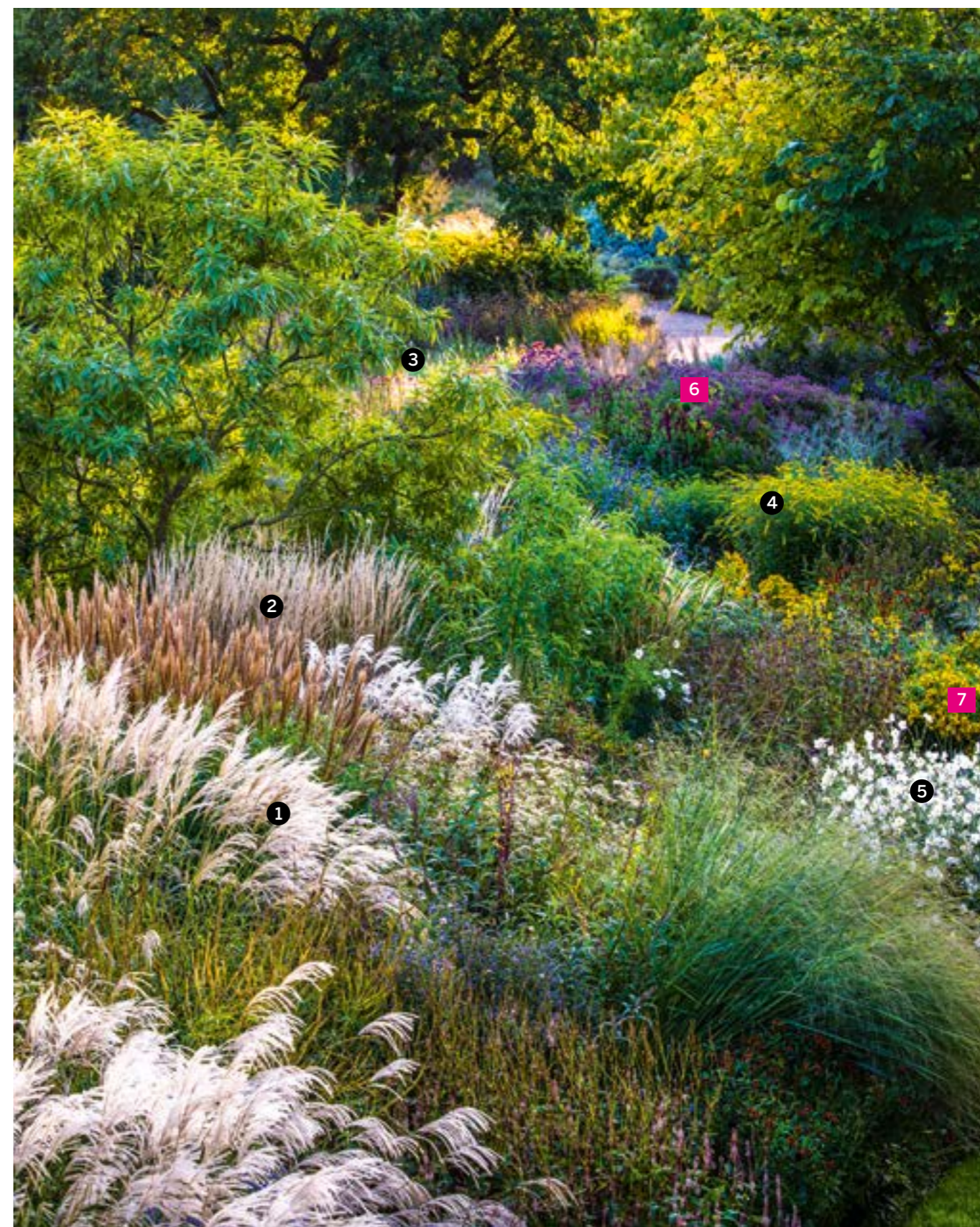
If you want to see the future of planting design – naturalistic, visually rich, complex, biodiverse, sustainable and low maintenance, but also exuberant and fun – there is no better place to come. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

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**Website** [sichtungsgarten-hermannshof.de](http://sichtungsgarten-hermannshof.de)



#### Feather light

This patchwork of airy grasses and colourful perennials is what greets Cassian each morning when he looks out of his office window. Grasses, including *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Graziella' (1) and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' (2) provide interest well into the winter. Solid structure is provided by the small tree, *x Chitalpa tashkentensis* (3), while the colour palette is dominated by the greens and subtle pinks of the grasses with occasional splashes of yellow from *Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks' (4) and the white of *Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' (5).