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GARDENS

ILLUSTRATED

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for early spring pots

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HOW TO
CREATE AN
**ornamental
allotment**

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IN BRIEF

What Garden designer's productive and ornamental allotment.
 Where London.
 Size 6m x 35m.
 Soil Sandy.
 Climate Temperate.
 Hardiness zone USDA 9.

The experimental plot

Garden designer Stefano Marinaz's Chiswick allotment is both a productive space and a place for him to trial new plants and combinations

WORDS NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS ALISTER THORPE

Five years ago garden designer Stefano Marinaz had something of a near miss. Having been on the waiting list for an allotment for two and a half years, he overlooked his acceptance letter by a week, leaving him with just a few days to take up the offer. "Thank goodness I wasn't on holiday," he says, "or it would have been given to somebody else." Luckily, everything worked out and the allotment is now a vital part of his life. He's there at least three mornings a week before work, and at weekends too – although he concedes that this time is more about enjoying the space than working on it.

Stefano started out simply hoping to grow some of his own veg, to reduce his reliance on the supermarket and all the plastics that so often entails. But as time has gone on, the plot has become so

much more besides, acting as both a trial garden and a nursery space for his commissions, and as a welcome escape from city life. As such, it is an appealing mix of the productive and the ornamental with planting beds filled with *Knautia macedonica*, *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' and *Asclepias tuberosa* dotted among the neat raised beds of onions and cavolo nero, the strawberry cage and the trailing squashes ('Turk's Turban' and red onion squash are particular favourites).

The greenhouse at the front of the plot is pivotal. "I grow my tomatoes there but I've included shelves so I can trial lots of seeds, too," says Stefano. As the grandson of a seedsman, this has always been a keen interest of Stefano's and he likes to keep an eye out for unusual cultivars. He favours Sarah Raven's selections among others and also propagates from unusual or interesting plants picked up on ▷

Above far left The blooms and seedheads of *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' combine well with perennials such as *Gaura lindheimeri* 'Whirling Butterflies', *Monarda* 'Scorpion' and *Echinacea pallida* 'Hula Dancer'.

Above left This magnificent *Verbascum bombyciferum* grows just outside the greenhouse, its base covered by a clump of *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'.

Above The old apple tree came with the plot and shelters a bed including *Rosa* 'Madame Boll', *Hylotelephium* 'Herbstfreude' and *Sesleria autumnalis*, valued for its tidy, clump-forming habit and vibrant green hue.



Above Stefano designed the pergola to echo the shape and roofline of the adjacent greenhouse. On it he grows *Vitis* 'Fragola', also known as the strawberry vine for its sweetly flavoured grapes.

▷ his travels. “By growing your own plants, you can observe them year round and at every stage of their lives,” he says. “You learn so much.”

Some of this is practical. Noting *Verbascum bombyciferum*'s ability to cope with drought, not to mention its height and beauty, Stefano has included plants grown at the allotment in the dry gravel path of a new project in Essex, which also features several of his *Lunaria* seedlings. “From my trials, I’ve realised how important self-seeders are,” he says, “so if there’s a bare spot, it’s them that fill it, rather than weeds.”

Other learnings have been aesthetic. He was delighted to note that another self-seeder, *Nigella papillosa* ‘African Bride’ has a seedpod quite unlike, but just as interesting as, that of the more common *N. damascena* species. At the other end of the spectrum, the allotment allows him free rein with planting combinations, something he assesses both

in the beds and through his daily cuttings, arranged in a vase to inspire future pairings. “Because I see this as a sort of workshop, I don’t feel particularly attached to any of the beds in the way one might in a garden, where you want plants to establish,” he says. “I’m always excited to replant after a couple of years and to try something new.”

So what is he planning for this year? Recent successes, including *Oenothera biennis* with the silvery seedheads of *Stipa ichu*, first spotted in the grass garden at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and a striking mix of *Salvia microphylla*, *Geranium Rozanne* (= ‘Gerwat’) and the fluffy seedheads of *Anemanthele lessoniana*, will be allowed to continue and develop, and Stefano will take cuttings of the salvia to increase the display next year.

Grasses such as *Stipa tenuissima* and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* ‘Transparent’ are used

throughout the allotment to link different beds and create a sense of cohesion and volume without blocking the view, and Stefano is keen to trial more. “Grasses are the key for sustainable natural planting,” he says. “If you have a good matrix of the right grasses, the perennials will work around them, but without them, you lack the main ingredient of the meadow.” *Stipa gigantea* has already been planted, and other tall, transparent grasses that move with the wind, such as *Pennisetum macrourum* and *Calamagrostis* ‘Karl Foerster’, are on the list.

As with most of the plants on the allotment, part of the attraction is their low maintenance. The plot is large and Stefano has limited time, so plants that can thrive with little or no intervention always catch his attention. “That’s what I love about perennials,” he says. “If you’ve planted them in the right place, you can just leave them to do their thing.” □

EASY PLANTS FOR ALLOTMENT INTEREST

1 *Panicum* ‘Frosted Explosion’ An airy firework of a grass that looks beautiful in sun or pearly with raindrops. Will self-seed, or sow seed indoors February–May. 45cm. RHS H4†.

2 *Kniphofia* ‘Bees’ Lemon’ This drought-resistant, easy-to-grow red-hot poker swaps zingy yellow for the red but is no less striking for that. Divide clumps in spring. 90cm. RHS H5.

3 *Salvia x sylvestris* ‘Dear Anja’ An upright salvia with dark stems and purple-blue flowers. Take softwood cuttings in April. 1m. RHS H7.

4 *Gillenia trifoliata* One of Stefano’s favourites, both for its delicate flowers and its sturdy winter skeleton. Sow seed indoors at any time. 40cm. AGM*. RHS H7, USDA 4a–8b.

5 *Oenothera biennis* A beautiful yet tough plant with a delicate scent. Its yellow blooms appear

at dusk to light up summer evenings. Sow direct in spring (or in a cold frame in autumn). 1.5m. RHS H7, USDA 4a–9b.

6 *Asclepias tuberosa* Also known as butterfly weed. Waxy, star-burst, summer flowers in yellow and orange. Sow in trays of gritty soil, and grow in sun and dry soil. 90cm. RHS H4, USDA 3a–9b.

7 *Glaucolus murielae* Understated beauty with nodding, highly scented, white flowers that have a distinctive purple blotch at their base. Plant corms in spring for summer display. 1m. AGM RHS H3, USDA 7a–10b.

8 *Nigella papillosa* ‘African Bride’ Pure-white petals with a dark centre and distinctive seedheads. Sow direct March–May or September–November. 70cm. RHS H3.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. †Hardiness ratings given where available.