

PRAIRIE GODFATHER

At his home in Hertfordshire, garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith has created a beautiful prairie-style meadow, growing a diverse range of plants from scratch

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The prairie meadow at Tom Stuart-Smith's home at Serge Hill in Hertfordshire was planted in 2011 with a mix of plants tailored to the site. Here, the purple spires of *Liatris pycnostachya* contrast with the spherical white flowers of *Eryngium yuccifolium*, known in the US as rattlesnake master



Tom Stuart-Smith isn't afraid of getting his hands dirty. Real gardening – and that means everything from mowing and pruning to growing plants from seed – has given him an acute understanding of a phenomenal range of plants, and he is perpetually experimenting, trying new combinations and pushing boundaries, so that he doesn't 'feel a fraud' when he designs for others.

Six years ago, after acquiring some more land from his brother at his family home at Serge Hill in Hertfordshire (see *House & Garden* June 2014), he decided to grow a prairie meadow from seed. He'd already created acres of beautiful native meadow, as well as more formal areas of the garden around the house, but this was to be something quite different. Having previously created such meadows for clients, he wanted the challenge of looking after a prairie garden himself. He enlisted the help of James Hitchmough, the professor of horticultural ecology at Sheffield University, who developed a bespoke perennial seed mix for the site. Scrupulously researched, the mix of more than 50 species includes both North American prairie plants that have become well known in recent years – asters, echinaceas, rudbeckias – but also lesser-known species from elsewhere in the world that give the meadow its distinctive look. 'It's both the randomised distribution of plants and the fact that many of them are unfamiliar that give the meadow its arresting quality,' says Tom.

Creating a landscape out of a packet of seed sounds simple, but to do it effectively meant a programme of hard-graft preparation. First the site was isolated from the surrounding pastureland by putting in rabbit fences followed by a new beech hedge. The ground was then levelled and sprayed to eradicate the weeds, before being divided into sections with grass paths running through. Each planting area was covered with three inches of sand, which acted both as a mulch to suppress the weeds and as a free-draining seedbed. The seeds were then raked in and covered with a fine jute mesh, to protect against birds and other predators, and watered regularly with a specially built sprinkler system fed from an underground tank. In

terms of soil, the site was complex, comprising both an area of dry, free-draining soil nearer the house and a patch of wet clay soil further away, so the mix was developed separately for both zones.

Once the seeds had germinated, incessant, meticulous weeding was necessary throughout the spring and summer, a terrifying task for anyone unfamiliar with the plants, as almost everyone involved was in that first year. Mistakes were made, as Tom cheerfully recounts, describing how his gardener pulled up *Solidago speciosa* seedlings thinking they were weeds. Inevitably, the mix hasn't been perfect, with some species such as *Aster oblongifolius* muscling in and taking over, and others never making an appearance. Tom has added plugs of other species that he thinks will enhance the mix. 'The only rule I've given myself is that anything I add, I have to grow myself from seed,' he says.

Now in its fourth year and fully established, the meadow needs little weeding and hardly any watering, although creeping buttercup is always threatening to encroach from the pasture beyond. Slugs are the main threat and Tom is planning to burn the patch in early spring to pre-empt that particular problem. For now, though, he is happy to watch the meadow develop through the seasons, appreciating each month for the changes it brings. He sees the first new shoots pushing up through the soil in early spring, observes the jewel-like flowers of *Dianthus carthusianorum* and *Penstemon barbatus* in early summer, and relishes the late-summer crescendo when eccentric *Silphium laciniatum* totters on tall

stems above a mass of greenery studded with purple, yellow and white. It is at this stage, in the early morning mist, that the meadow takes your breath away. It looks like a still-life painting. Unlike more cultivated parts of the garden, where Tom is consciously putting plants together, the prairie meadow is out of his ultimate control. 'Nature is the artist,' he concludes. 'You're unleashing something that has its own momentum' □

Tom Stuart-Smith: 020-7253 2100; www.tomstuartsmith.co.uk | The gardens at Serge Hill will open on behalf of the Garden Museum on September 15. 020-7401 8865; www.gardenmuseum.org.uk

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OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The prairie in the early morning mist. The leaf of *Silphium laciniatum*. A seating area among the plants. *Silphium terebinthinaceum*. Clouds of rudbeckias. Burnt orange *Asclepias tuberosa* with *Euphorbia corollata*. *Aster oblongifolius*. BELOW *Silphium* and rudbeckia tower above the plants along a curving path leading towards the barn

