

Prairie planting in St Petersburg

Russia's 'city of the tsars' has some surprising links with European perennial plantings. This naturalistic style of gardening is gaining an enthusiastic following and is thriving, thanks to recent projects such as that on the man-made island of New Holland

Author: **Noel Kingsbury**, garden designer and writer. Photography: **Richard Bloom**



Created in 1719, New Holland Island is bounded by the Kryukov Canal, Admiralty Canal and the Moyka River. The area was redeveloped this century, opening in 2016; the park zone now features prairie-style plantings with drifts of grasses and flowering perennials.

Drifts of grasses and perennials stretch out along one side of a square, lined with historic buildings and what look like repurposed warehouses. People wander through the planting on paths, many of them going to or from a restaurant whose sitting-out area is next to one end of the planting. This is a good example of the kind of large-scale perennial planting that is increasingly seen in Europe and North America and associated with Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf. In fact its real antecedents lie in German garden-show plantings of the 1950s onwards, or more recently with the Oehme, van Sweden partnership, who began creating extensive beds of grasses and perennials in Washington DC, USA, in the 1980s.

Uniting past and present

The interest for many will be that this impressive border is in St Petersburg, illustrating on the one hand the interest in perennial planting in Russia, and Eastern Europe generally, but also the sort of plantings possible at this northerly latitude; in winter temperatures occasionally fall below -30°C (-22°F) while in summer they may exceed 30°C (86°F).

The planting is the decorative heart of a major urban redevelopment on New Holland Island, a 8ha (20 acre) island created in the 18th century by the city's founder, tsar Peter the Great, as a warehouse facility for the Russian fleet. In Soviet times it was used as a logistics base by the navy, and closed to all but military staff. It became redundant but has been redeveloped as a cultural and retail district by entrepreneur Roman Abramovich working with West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture.

'We wanted to avoid traditional garden flowers,' says Dmitry Golubev. With Yuri Fomenko, he is co-partner in MOX, a landscape design company that worked with West 8, most of whose experience is in making private gardens across Russia. 'We had to work within the constraints of the local climate and, importantly for a public space, it has to look good for as much of the year as possible,' Dmitry says. The positioning of the 800sq m (957sq yd) planting meant it had to be appreciated, as Yuri says, 'in the round: from the nearby street, from lawns where people sit in summer, from the restaurant nearby, and paths that pass through it.'

The dominant plants are of course grasses and perennials chosen to have a good appearance after >>

Red *Persicaria*, fluffy pink *Sanguisorba*, *Alchemilla*, *Salvia* yet to flower, *Hylotelephium* and a meld of different grasses lead the eye to what seems to be a boat under construction. In fact a children's climbing frame, it is a visual link to the island's nautical past and Peter the Great's passion for shipbuilding.



flowering, but the year here starts off in early May with bulbs – *Narcissus* ‘Toto’ AGM and *N. poeticus*, *Fritillaria meleagris* AGM, alliums and dark tulips. The dominant feature of May and June is the plantings’ signature aspect: salvias. Inspired by a ‘salvia river’ in a park designed by Piet Oudolf in 1996 in Enköping in Sweden, and repeated for the Lurie Garden in Chicago, USA, three selections of *Salvia x sylvestris* (‘Blauhügel’ AGM, ‘Blaukönigin’ and ‘Mainacht’ AGM) plus *S. nemorosa* ‘Ostfriesland’ AGM are blended in violet-blue waves across the area. ‘They are a unifying element,’ says Yury, ‘a distinctive branding for the planting, they also have two flowering seasons, and are good plants in our region.’ Indeed, *S. nemorosa* and related species are extremely hardy, drought tolerant and long-lived; typical of steppe flora that stretches from eastern Ukraine to Xinjiang in northwest China.

Next to the blocks of salvias are some smaller waves of golden brown flowered ornamental grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* ‘Bronzeschleier’, as well as some less frequent groups of other reliable grasses: »



Interest in perennials in Russia

The interest in both naturalistic planting and perennials in Eastern Europe that has developed since the 1990s is quite incredible writes Noel Kingsbury. Western designers John Brookes and Rosemary Alexander both had long relationships with garden schools in Russia, while I have taught there and in Ukraine, the Baltic republics and run a three-day workshop for Warsaw city council; the enthusiasm of the students is memorable. The vast majority of garden perennials hail from continental climates, and so thrive. In the north, long periods of summer sun can help compensate for lower summer temperatures than would be typical of their native ranges.

Historical perspective

The history of growing perennials in Russia has been limited to private gardens, mostly around dachas (traditional seasonal, second homes usually located in the countryside), often with North American species introduced to Europe

during the 19th century. However, St Petersburg Botanical Garden played an important role in introducing east Asian plants to Europe, largely through the work of plant hunter Karl Maximovich (1827–1891).

There is an interesting background to the new enthusiasm. As Yury Fomenko says, ‘The roots of this planting movement are deep here,’ and the reason being that Soviet-bloc botany took herbaceous plants more seriously than anyone did in the west. In particular, Soviet work in the 1950s was later picked up by Polish researcher Aleksander Lukasiewicz, whose 1962 doctoral thesis explains in extraordinary systematic detail the growth habits of perennials, developing the only coherent system for understanding them that has ever been devised. His work, and his later career in teaching, was influential in Russia, as well as in the Baltic republics with their relatively mild climates, which made them important centres for horticulture.



The planting and open space has a distinctly European feel, much in keeping with the original vision of the city. Grand buildings in the background stand on the other bank of the Admiraltesky Canal.

Calamagrostis brachytricha AGM, *C. x acutiflora* 'Overdam', *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Moorhexe' AGM and *Sesleria caerulea*. The rest of the planted area is filled with blocks of perennials chosen to provide colour for as much of summer as possible. There is a further aspect – the use of accent plants, chosen says Yury, 'as bright spots, but they have to be carefully placed. We cannot have many such plants in the salvia river as they detract from the salvia but we put them into blocks so they are seen. For example if you put a *Molinia* emerging from *Deschampsia* there are two layers, or *Echinacea* or *Echinops* in *Deschampsia* groups, they can be seen clearly and are stable combinations.'

Essentially this is about choosing plants that are highlighted by being surrounded by less emphatic forms and textures. These planting combinations continue to work through the winter because

nearly all the selections chosen have attractive, and physically strong, seedheads.

The flora here is largely the standard New Wave perennial flora, nearly all of which thrives at these latitudes, but with one locally native element, the grass *Leymus arenarius*, 'chosen for its blue foliage colour, to relate to the blue of the salvias,' says Yury. Infamously invasive, it is kept in check here by being planted in special containers.

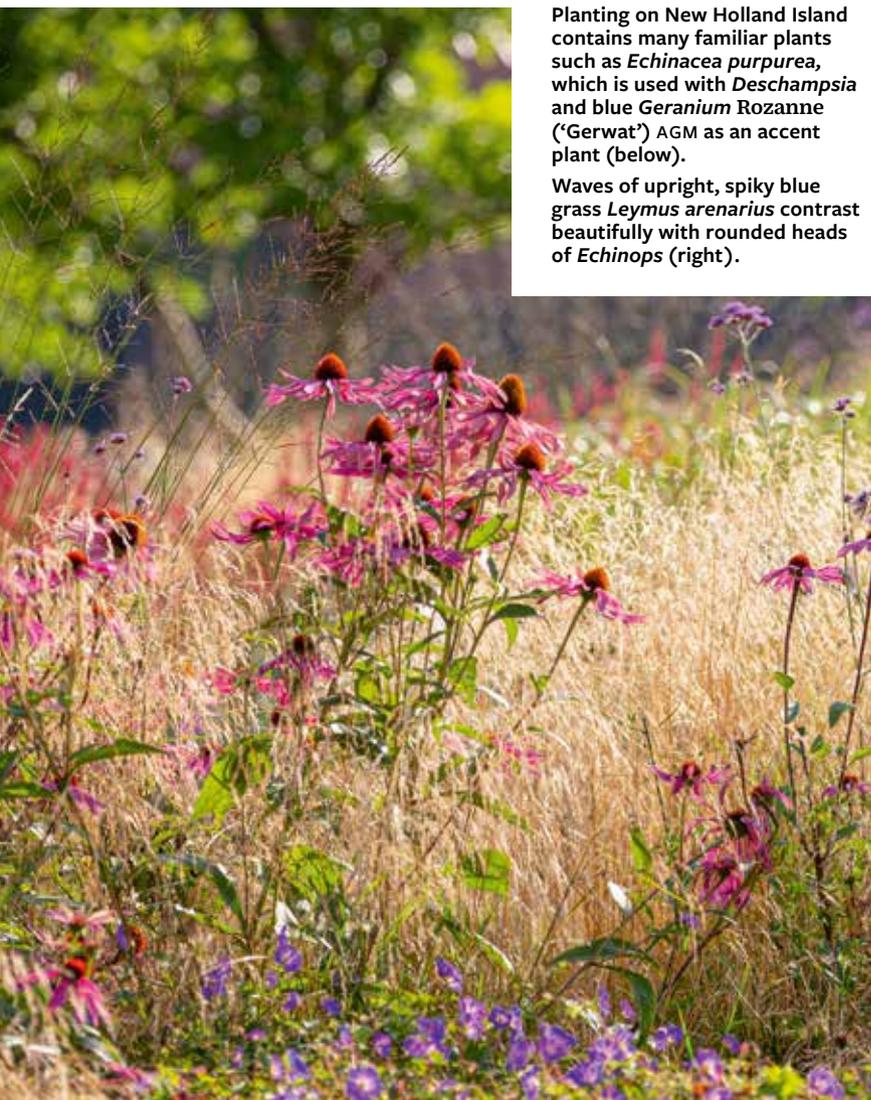
This is a sophisticated planting design which shows just how much mileage there still is in developing plant juxtapositions that show off increasingly familiar plants at their best. It will of course only survive with skilled maintenance, but that is assured because MOX not only design and build, they manage their plantings too. This is a model that is quite common in high-end Russian projects, and one that we could all learn from. ○

Resources

190121, Saint Petersburg, Admiralty Canal Embankment 2, Russia

Entry is free; open Mon–Thurs 9am–10pm, Fri–Sun 9am–11pm.

Most plants mentioned here are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2020*, and online at [rhs.org.uk/findaplant](https://www.rhs.org.uk/findaplant)



Planting on New Holland Island contains many familiar plants such as *Echinacea purpurea*, which is used with *Deschampsia* and blue *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat') AGM as an accent plant (below).

Waves of upright, spiky blue grass *Leymus arenarius* contrast beautifully with rounded heads of *Echinops* (right).

