

**ASSOCIATION
MASTERCLASS**

Lumine Swagerman's eye for detail is clear whether her plantings are viewed close up or from a wider perspective. Alchemilla, hostas, alliums, euphorbia, fennel, campanula, lupins and geraniums combine in an artfully naturalistic, but meticulously planned, herbaceous riot, backed by shrubs, hedges and climbers

INTRICATE TAPESTRY

A small garden on the outskirts of a Dutch village proves that you do not need space to amass a plant collection. Garden writer Nicola Stocken Tomkins pays a visit and finds less can most definitely be more. Photography by Nicola Stocken Tomkins

GARDENPROFILE

PACKING THEM IN
Not an inch of space is wasted in this compact Dutch garden. Deadheading is a daily task for owner Lumine (right)

AT FIRST GLANCE, Lumine Swagerman's garden resembles an intricate tapestry in which individual leaves and flowers are expertly interwoven, lying dormant until the sun filters through the trees behind. 'The evening light brings my garden alive, and the flowers seem to glow against the sombre background of the forest,' says Lumine of her little garden on the outskirts of a small village towards the centre of the Netherlands. It is an ever-changing picture, but this variable nature is essential to its charm – she sees her garden as an unfinished canvas on which she is continually working and changing.

With its narrow pathways, packed beds and carefully graded planting, this is a garden for lingering in lest some rarity be inadvertently overlooked through undue haste. Its creator loves seeing plants close-up, as well as standing back to enjoy the textures and colours of particular combinations. And with some 250 different perennials packed among shrubs and bulbs in a plot measuring just 180sq m (less than 2,000sq ft), there is always something special that amply repays closer inspection.

Early days

It was not always so. When Lumine and her partner Henk Sinnema moved to the village of Laag-Soeren, not far from Arnhem, in 2003, the garden was a rectangle of lawn and unimaginative borders, the whole of it visible in a single glance. Some back-breaking labour followed, not only to remove several gigantic tree stumps, but also to dig



Misty drifts of *Nepeta* and salvia behind *Astrantia major* 'Ruby Wedding' and *Rosa Flower Carpet Sunshine* ('Noason')



Greenish-yellow buds of *Aconitum x cammarum* 'Grandiflorum Album' open into spires of pale cream hoods

'LADY GARDENERS TEND TO USE A LOT OF PINK, BUT IT'S TOO

volumes of compost into the poor, sandy soil. Henk nobly laid the paved paths according to Lumine's simple, even sober, design, which dispensed with a lawn to turn all the space into borders within the paths' strong framework: the garden's 'bones', these allow it to be enjoyed from the house and appreciated from many angles.

There are two terraces, one beside the house, the other sunken at the far end of the garden, hidden behind tall plants. A yew hedge marks the furthest boundary, parting at a pergola which allows a path to continue beside a sunken parking bay, between narrow borders, for another 10m (33ft). This additional strip of land gives the impression the garden is far longer than it actually is. Its focal point is purple-leaved *Cotinus* 'Grace'. Lumine loves the way its leaves hold water droplets. 'And when the sunlight shines through, it looks as if it's on fire,' she says.

The garden also contains many rarities, mostly sourced from specialist nurseries such as De Hessenhof at nearby Ede. When she comes across something special, she finds it hard to resist, but it has to blend into her colour scheme. 'Lady gardeners tend to use a lot of pink, but it's too sweet for me: I prefer the palest yellows, almost white.' She especially loves hazes of soft violet-blue with accents of purple or dark red, so it is no surprise to find *Lobelia*

x speciosa 'Hadspen Purple', *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Blauhügel' (often sold as *S. nemorosa* Blue Mound) and *Scutellaria incana* featuring strongly. It is not so much colour as proportion that is the overriding consideration – many plants are simply too big for her tiny plot, so she is always on the lookout for smaller selections, such as a recent find, a miniature *Cotinus coggygria* called 'Young Lady', reaching no more than 1.8m (6ft). She is now searching for 'baby' *Philadelphus* (mock orange) and *Syringa* (lilac).

Always learning

Lumine's English is excellent, in part due to the large number of gardening books she has read over the last two decades. 'When I first became interested in gardening, I bought and studied just about every English and Dutch gardening book I could lay my hands on,' she says. Starting with Russell Page's *The Education of a Gardener*, she has read Vita Sackville-West, Penelope Hobhouse and Beth Chatto, and re-reads books by Christopher Lloyd on plant behaviour and plant care. Following a course in garden design and visits to well-known gardens in Britain, Italy and the Netherlands, Lumine started working as a garden designer, enjoying the challenge of translating the wishes of clients into good design, with 'interesting' plants. ▶

SWEET FOR ME: I PREFER THE PALEST YELLOWS, ALMOST WHITE'



Flowering for a long season from early summer until the frosts, *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat') is a first-rate perennial



On the wooden frame, *Rosa Guirlande d'Amour* ('Lenalbi') stands out against the black walls of the house

**ACROSS THE PLOT**

Luxuriant planting spills onto the paths, and in some cases run right across them: here, ribbons of *Acaena microphylla* 'Kupferteppich' (syn. Copper Carpet) slice the paving that leads towards a focal-point glazed pot under moody purple-leaved *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo'

Informed choices

It is the plants that lie at the heart of Lumine's gardening philosophy, and she is painstaking in her research. This is how she came across a little-known white rambler rose, *Rosa Guirlande d'Amour* ('Lenalbi'), a *R. moschata* hybrid introduced in 1993. The name translates as 'garland of love'; trained on a freestanding wooden frame, it flowers for almost four weeks, repeating the display in September. It needed to be strong to cope with the poor, sandy soil, and to have small flowers to blend with the woodland backdrop.

With so little space, she has to avoid vigorous, invasive plants, so was delighted when she came across a neat, non-spreading *Lysimachia*, tidy *L. atropurpurea*. One of her best performers is *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat'), a must-have perennial which flowers from the end of May until late November, its neat foliage and pretty flowers held aloft as if on an invisible frame. Inevitably, not every plant settles in so readily. *Eryngium giganteum* (Miss Willmott's ghost), for example, has taken several years to get established, but Lumine is unfazed: the longer she has to wait for a plant to develop, the more she appreciates it when it does.

One of her greatest challenges lies in creating interest all year round (see box, right). 'It's the hardest thing to achieve in a small space, so I try to design each bed so that as one plant goes over, another nearby flowers,' she says, admitting she has to be incredibly careful when digging because her beds are so tightly packed.

Nevertheless, she prefers to plant in groups of three or more; it is not always possible in a small garden, so she compensates by contrasting flower sizes, or leaf colours and forms. As a background to perennials she has planted shrubs such as grey-leaved *Salvia officinalis* 'Berggarten' and *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo', its dark purple foliage a wonderful foil for tall, airy plants such as *Thalictrum lucidum* or *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* var. *alba*.

BEFORE AND AFTER SUMMER

Lumine prides herself on inventing planting combinations that give her year-round interest, so although her garden makes much use of summer-flowering herbaceous perennials, she has many other seasonal star performers.

• **Winter:** the garden is stripped back to reveal some lovely evergreen shrubs, including *Mahonia x media* 'Charity', *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl', *Osmanthus x burkwoodii* and *Nandina domestica*. For winter flowers and scent there is a witch hazel, *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida'. The rich shrimp-pink branches of coral-bark Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku') contrast with the garden's many ornamental grasses, left untrimmed for winter to beautify them with frost.

• **Spring:** a succession of bulbous plants give colour before the perennials get into their stride: small bulbous iris, narcissi, muscari, crocuses and anemones, then epimediums, primroses, tulips and fritillaries. As these bloom and die back they are engulfed by the summer profusion of perennials shown in these pictures.

• **Autumn:** when many perennials begin flagging, late-season colour comes from a selection of asters, and three lofty *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen'. Further structure and colour comes from the garden's shrubby backbone, enlivened by grasses including *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light', *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent', *Calamagrostis brachytricha* and *C. x acutiflora* 'Overdam'. *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Blackfield' adds its rust-red spires late in the year.

'MY GARDEN IS A PERSONAL EXPERIMENT, A CHANCE TO TRY OUT EXCITING PLANTS, COMBINING THEIR FORMS AND COLOURS'

No discussion of gardening in the Netherlands would be complete without mention of Dutch plantsman and designer Piet Oudolf; is he, I wondered, as highly regarded in his own country as overseas? 'Oh yes, Dutch gardeners are greatly influenced by his ideas, and the unusual perennials and grasses he has promoted,' says Lumine. 'He has dramatically changed the traditional style of a border to something far more naturalistic. I have huge respect for Oudolf; he is a genius, but his style needs space, and I just do not have a large enough garden to indulge myself.'

So every spring and autumn Lumine has to reconsider which plants need cutting back (*Cotinus* are always on the list), while others are divided. Still others are moved to more suitable places, or to produce new combinations. It's rather like reinventing a puzzle, she admits: hers is a high-maintenance garden, and certainly not to be imitated for

any of her clients, but she enjoys her personal rebellion against the trends for restricted planting and easy-care plants. 'It has been a rare luxury to be able to follow my own ideas, without having to please others,' she says. 'My garden is a personal experiment, a chance to try out exciting plants, combining their forms and colours to create a beautiful picture year round. It has surpassed my expectations, but if you love plants and learn where to position them, they will perform for you.' ■

Nicola Stocken Tomkins is a garden writer and photographer

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