



A garden cast from clay

Beside Aston Pottery in Oxfordshire grows a garden that reaches a spectacular zenith in late summer and autumn when its borders shimmer with vibrant colour »

Author: Naomi Slade, award-winning writer, presenter and designer. Photography: Clive Nichols

Annual sensation at Aston Pottery

It takes Jane and Stephen Baughan at Aston Pottery three and a half days to plant the garden's 80 x 7m (262 x 23ft) annual border. Plants are put out in June in triangular blocks to create a sense of structure. By the end of summer it makes a spectacular sight. In this section, blue *Agastache* and *Ageratum* contrast with the orange heads of *Tithonia rotundifolia* 'Fiesta del Sol', while *Calendula* and *Cleome hassleriana* inject more interest. Sunflowers here are superb, with many selections grown, such as *Helianthus annuus* 'Ring of Fire'.



Blaze of glory

The Hot Bank impresses visitors, blending fiery *Dahlia* selections – often those with dark foliage such as red ‘Bishop of Llandaff’ AGM and double orange ‘David Howard’ AGM – with similarly coloured perennials. Standout here is soaring *Lobelia tupa* with its spires of flaming red blooms.



Delicate and demure anemone

The soft pink flowers of *Anemone x hybrida* ‘Königin Charlotte’ AGM are produced over a long season. Easy to grow and tolerant of quite dry, lightly shaded places when established, late-flowering herbaceous anemones such as this make essential plants for the late-summer and autumn garden. »

Seasonal overture

The vibrant double Dahlia Borders provide plenty to admire. A range of dahlia selections are backed by upright grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’ while, in front, repeated clumps of *Symphytotrichum novi-belgii* ‘Lady in Blue’ and *Aster x frikartii* ‘Wunder von Stäfa’ AGM provide later-season rhythm.





At Aston Pottery in Oxfordshire, the borders are a sight to behold. Long, wide and popping with colour, they welcome summer and autumn with all flags flying. But, bodacious though they are, it has taken dedication to achieve this magnificence.

When owners Jane and Stephen Baughan discovered the derelict farmyard 35 years ago, their plans were tentative. 'I was working as a builder at the time but we wanted to make something people could use,' says Stephen, 'I considered a career in glass-blowing or making acoustic guitars but, in the end, I renovated houses by day and we developed our pottery skills by night, teaching ourselves to make moulds and slips.'

They took the plunge into pottery in 1988 and opened the shop six years later. 'We started the garden to draw more people in,' he says, 'The first perennial border we created is rather traditional, filled with herbaceous plants such as perennial sunflowers including *Helianthus* 'Bitter Chocolate' and 'Lemon Queen' AGM, then there are *Rudbeckia*, *Inula*, *Solidago* and *Veronicastrum*. There are lots of different asters and salvias, too, providing interest for visitors from June into late autumn.'

King-size beds

A whopping 42m (138ft) long and 7m (23ft) deep, this perennial border set the tone for what was to come: in 2009, it was followed by a hornbeam walk, a double dahlia border, an immense hot bank and, most recently, an annual border. Each of these has a different character and feel, but Stephen has a distinctive style. He is big on structure and strong colour schemes; he plants intensively and propagates liberally. The interplay between the plants is key – the contrasting greens and purples, the lively harmonies of pink and plum, orange and blue. The effect of a combination is far more important than the cultivars used, but Stephen does have his darlings: salvias, coreopsis, asters and dahlias.

The gardening is done around the pottery, yet is approached with formidable energy and enthusiasm. 'From May to July it takes about four hours a night, after work,' he says, 'and then there are weeks of intense activity – in March we clear, weed and dig the borders. Then we get in 60 tonnes of spent mushroom compost and a truckload of lime-free grit, spread it over the top and mix it with a digger.'

The soil is alkaline clay but, with lashings of care and the added organic matter, the borders are now free draining, moisture retentive and nutrient rich. 'It is fine, like sugar. A joy to work with,' he says, cheerfully.

Which is just as well. In April they sow 120 packets of seeds – about 8,500 seeds in total – largely for an annual border that fizzes with colour into autumn. These are pricked into plugs then planted in the second week of June.

'The trick with the annual border is to sow late and plant out small,' says Stephen. 'Small plants go in fast and need only small amounts of water to establish well. We plant intensively here, hoe it once, then everything will merge. We've got a mole working through, but that's the only problem we have.'

Firing up enthusiasm

An avenue of *Carpinus* (the Hornbeam Walk) bisects the pottery's car park and leads to a summerhouse, with the Hot Bank beyond. Because of the trees, it is the only place Stephen has installed an irrigation system. 'Elsewhere, the garden has to look after itself,' he says. But his favourite area is the most awkward and physically challenging of his creations. Building works on the visitor centre complete, rubble was pushed to the edge of the car park, and there it stayed. But it didn't remain an eyesore for long. 'I had this idea for a dappled hillside with shafts of colour going up the bank,' he says. 'As it happens, most of the plants I chose are from the Americas, which is a bit of a fluke. The soil is rich but, with the underlying rubble, the bank drains freely and allows us to keep plants outdoors that would normally rot in winter – things such as *Eremurus*, *Dahlia*, *Canna* and *Lobelia tupa*.'

Known as the Hot Bank, due to its fiery flower colours, it is a dramatic sight, a flowing landscape of controlled anarchy – a tapestry of plants with flashes of colour, skilfully and subtly interwoven. As gaps appear, Stephen drops in replacements, and he is gradually reworking the area, planting single specimens rather than blocks. 'It is slightly existential in that I am responding to the site. I plant red, orange and yellow flowers with as much purple foliage as possible. If the plant doesn't like it, it dies and I change the strategy. It is me and the garden in dialogue.'

The dialogue seems to be working. As the border establishes, many plants are self-seeding and, as he hoes, Stephen selectively leaves a tithe of new dahlias, *Ricinus* and *Rudbeckia*, unique to the site and a product of his partnership with the garden.

'I am not pleased with much I do, but I am pleased with the bank. It is a bit like an imagined American hillside and it is the most original thing I have ever done in my life.' The result is a triumph of vision that gives Aston Pottery its dramatic and inspiring sense of place. ●

Discovering dahlias

At Aston Pottery, Jane and Stephen grow a great many dahlias, from showy Cactus and Pompon selections to more demure Collerette cultivars such as elegant *Dahlia* 'Inglebrook Jill' (right).



Summer's finale

Facing borders and an avenue of hornbeams lead to a summerhouse, with the Hot Bank beyond. Perennials here include golden *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii* AGM, mauve *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch' AGM, reddish pink *Phlox paniculata* 'Starfire' AGM and blue *Geranium* Rozanne ('Gerwat') AGM.

Visiting
Aston Pottery

The Stables, Kingsway Farm,
Aston, Oxfordshire OX18 2BT;
01993 852031;
astonpottery.co.uk

Open: 7 days a week: Mon–Sat 9am–5pm,
Sunday 10.30am–5pm, year round, except
Christmas Day, Boxing Day and Easter Sunday.

Garden at its overall best in July, August and
September, but tulip displays in April–May,
followed by spring interest in the Hornbeam
Walk, where there are also plants included
for their winter structure.

Admission: free; ample parking; dogs
allowed in the garden (not in the café or
shop). Garden tours and group visits
available; for more see website.

Accessibility: all public areas are
accessible for wheelchair users.



ASTON
POTTERY



Pottery owner
Stephen Baughan