

Smooth Sailing

Rethinking succession plantings and plant combinations for smooth transition from spring into summer.

By Jonathan Wright

LIKE MANY GARDENERS, I love the act of gardening. It is very satisfying to plunge a trowel into freshly turned soil or take pair of sharp pruners to an unruly branch. I am sure that I am not the first gardener who has gotten antsy after a dreary winter and headed to the local garden center for a bit of spring color in late March. Why listen to weather forecasters or the advice of other (perhaps more sane?) gardeners. This is complete optimism and gardening encourages this sort of behavior.

As one of seven horticulturists at Chanticleer Garden in Wayne, PA, it is my responsibility to make sure my area of the garden is looking stellar from opening day through closing each year. Depending on how the calendar falls, this may be as early as the last few days of March through the first few days of November.

To have the garden ready for visitors, I ultimately end up pushing the limits with my spring displays. To be ready for “showtime” means having to always plant in the third or fourth week in March. Over the last nine years, I have developed my own list of what I consider to be downright cold tolerant plants. These can go in the ground and containers during that last week of March and continue to look good at least until the arrival of warm summer weather. A few even make it through the entire season. The main lesson learned is to never under-

estimate the process of hardening-off. Another important rule is to ignore any preconceived notions as to what types of plants can or should be used in combinations. I’ve become a big fan of edibles, such as cool season vegetables and culinary herbs. This group of plants can take frost and, on occasion, I have had beds planted for opening day suddenly buried under 5" of snow without showing any signs of damage when the snow melted away.

Until this past spring, I was responsible for designing, installing, and maintaining the Entrance, Teacup Garden, and Tennis Court Garden. This area comprises a series of patios and courtyards, formally laid-out borders, as well as meandering beds. Over the

course of time in one’s garden lessons, observations are made and lessons are learned. Through the passage of seasons, one can become, dare I say, comfortable in one’s own garden. Last autumn, in a brilliant move to encourage fresh ideas and new perspectives in the garden and among staff, our director Bill Thomas moved the full-time gardeners around, assigning new garden areas. With this change, many of the horticulturists, including myself, are now tending new spaces. I am now responsible for the gardens surrounding the main house and terraces including the swimming pool.

I began dreaming up ideas for my new garden areas almost immediately, but the real design work started in the depths of winter. Looking at photographs of your garden throughout the season is a great way to take note of what works, what you want to work on, and, perhaps most importantly, what you want to avoid.

I’ve recently started shooting quick images with my phone and emailing them to myself with comments attached. The camera is perhaps the simplest way of documenting the garden. One thing that always jumps out at me in photographs, especially photos taken of recently planted areas, is bare soil. While I know that plants grow and eventually fill



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In the border alongside the containers discussed, a carpet of burgundy-foliaged edibles fills space at the feet of tall red tulips, *Tulipa 'Big Red'*. Edibles include Lollo Rossa lettuce, Bull's Blood beets, Violetta pak choi, and bronze fennel. As the edibles were harvested or began to die out due to warm weather, they were gradually replaced with coleus and alternanthera, also in burgundy toned foliage.

in, I can't help but think that if I see bare soil I must need more plants! I also always think of the weedy potential of exposed soil. In the past, I've usually planted my spring displays and containers very heavily, with tight spacing, to achieve a more instant effect. Later, when it came time to replace cool weather plants that made up the spring display, I would remove them all at once. With a clean slate, the summer display can be laid out and planted in one fell swoop. This is typically how seasonal bedding is handled. The problem with this type of traditional bedding-out is that in early summer when the garden should be looking its best, the new summer bedding often appears awkward. Plants that have just gone in have yet to root, orient their foliage, or fill in, thus exposing lots of soil and generally looking unsettled. The other problem with removing the spring combinations all at once is that the plants rarely all go over at the same time. So while the weather has warmed, spring bulbs have finished blooming, and you have summer plants ready to be planted, it might be painful to clear the way for new plantings with foxgloves still in heavy bloom.

So this year, I have made a very deliberate attempt to have as little soil showing as possible. Instead of switching out containers and beds clean-slate style, I've been replacing them piecemeal. In this style, pull cool season plants as they begin to fade (or, in the case of lettuces or other edibles, harvested and eaten) and replace them with the heat loving summer plants, a little at a time. I have been very happy with the results of this approach. There are a few things to take into consideration with this technique. First, it helps

to have a consistent color scheme or at the very least consider the plants you are planting for spring and summer. Consider the planting plan of both displays and try to make sure they will work together. For instance, if you plan to spot a coleus throughout a summer border, you could use a lettuce to do the same early in the spring, making the change of that one plant very simple.

Here is an example of a succession of plant combinations in a bed sized roughly 9' by 30'. In November, I planted a mixture of three yellow tulip cultivars (sold as *Tulipa* Yellow Cubed™ mix) with early, mid, and late bloom times. I covered the entire area with the yellow tulips at 12–14" spacing. For contrast, I planted a series of various sized polka-dots of *Tulipa* 'Black Parrot' dotted across the bed. When the tulips began to show in late March, I planted bronze fennel *Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum' in between the emerging black parrot tulips. Then, between the remaining yellow tulips, I tiptoed (joke withheld) and planted the remaining spaces with lavender wallflowers (*Erysimum* 'Winter Joy') and sweet alyssum in varying shades of purple and lavender, (*Lobularia maritima* 'Easter Bonnet Lavender'). The whole effect worked as I had hoped with the wallflowers and alyssum adding color until the tulips began blooming in mid April. The yellow tulips looked lovely with lavender booms at their toes and bloom continued for quite some time, given the staggered bloom of the three cultivars and the gift of a cool, long spring. As the yellow tulips hit peak bloom, the black parrot tulips began opening above the ferny mist of the bronze fennel foliage. After heavy rains knocked the last of the yellow tulip petals to the ground,



A mid-April image shows the first combination of the *Tulipa* Yellow Cubed™ mix, blooming with a carpet of lavender wallflowers and sweet alyssum.



The same bed a few weeks later, after the yellow tulips have been removed and replaced with the summer plants. The last of the tulip flowers complement the color palette and offer a little extra to the summer planting scheme, as well as bridge the gap until the plants have begun to grow.



The sweet alyssum and wallflowers fill space and cover soil, in addition to complementing the planting. *Silybum marianum*, with its white marbled foliage, contrasts nicely with the purple leaves of *Strobilanthes dyerianus* and flowers of *Heliotropium arborescens*.

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Proven Performers

More than just pansies, these plants will all tolerate seriously cold weather. In my garden, they have all survived temperatures as low as 27°F with little or no visible signs of damage, once they have been hardened-off. Most will last into early summer and help bridge the gap while warm season plants fill in.

Annuals and flowers for early color:

Antirrhinum spp & cvs (snapdragons)

Bellis (English daisies)

Brassica juncea 'Brazen Brass' & 'Red Giant' (mustard greens)—both have stunning burgundy foliage. Can be eaten before bolting or allowed to bloom, adding tall yellow blossoms before dying in heat.

Calendula (pot marigold)

Erysimum 'Winter Joy', **E.** 'Winter Sorbet' (wallflower)—great performers, many new cvs are wonderful. Buried under snow without any damage, these may be the hardiest cool season flowers I know.

Gilia capitata (blue thimble flower)—blooms into early summer, fades with heat.

Lactuca sativa cvs (lettuces)—harvest as needed to enjoy and plant empty spaces slowly with summer plants.

Lathyrus spp & cvs (sweet peas)—start early, as early as September the previous year, and grow cold through winter or harden-off in early March. All fade quickly with summer heat.

Linaria (toadflax)

Nasturtium—harden-off well before planting and protect from wind.

Nemesia spp & cvs

Osteospermum, Dimorphotheca, Ursinia (South African daisies)

Papaver nudicaule (Iceland poppies)

Ranunculus asiaticus Bloomingdale mix or **La Belle** mix (Persian Buttercup)—both wonderful in seriously cold weather, but die early with warm weather.

Edibles for cold weather and long into the summer:

Many of these can be groomed and will last all season into and through the cooler weather of autumn.

Swiss Chard, 'Bright Lights' mix, single color strains.

Beets, Bulls Blood—dark burgundy foliage.

Cabbages, kale cvs, especially 'Lacinato' (syn 'Dinosaur' or 'Tuscan Kale')—last through the whole season if groomed and protected from cabbage moths.

Leeks provide a strong vertical component in mixed container designs.

Herbs: parsley; sage (golden variegated, silver 'Berggarten', tricolor); **rosemary**, trailing and upright; and **thyme**—lemon thyme, yellow variegated. English thyme very quick to fill in.

they were carefully removed from the combination leaving the groundcover of lilac-colored blooms, accented with clusters of black parrot tulips and bronze fennel. As the last of the black tulips began to drop, the summer plants were installed among the alyssum and wallflowers. A combination of Persian shield (*Strobilanthes dyerianus*), tall verbena (*Verbena bonariensis*), black pearl pepper (*Cap-sicum annuum* 'Black Pearl'), heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*), and *Salvia splendens* 'Paul' continue the purple color scheme. *Centaurea cineraria* 'Colchester White' and milk-thistle (*Silybum marianum*) were added in for a touch of silver. A green flowering tobacco (*Nicotiana langsdorffii*) and soft orange flowering maple (*Abutilon* Lucky Lantern® Tangerine) were added as accents.

The effect, immediately after planting, was that of a well-established, grown-in border. It was a little extra effort to plant among the existing plants, however the final result was worth the effort. After two weeks, the planting looks as if it has been there all spring. The colors and textures all work together to create a lovely display. As the summer plants fill in, the bed will slowly morph into the planned summer display, hiding the dying cool season plants in the process. This method worked wonders in another bed where spring-planted lettuces, kale, mustard greens, and beets, all with burgundy-toned foliage, were slowly harvested and replaced with coleus, *Hemigraphis*, and *Alternanthera* cultivars, also with burgundy colored foliage.

A similar piece-by-piece change-over was done in a series of containers with a burgundy and red theme. These containers were planted in the last week of March, to complement the nearby beds. Being large pots, they enabled me to sink 12" pots of tulips (*Tulipa* 'Big Red') into the center of the pot. This same technique would

work equally well with *Narcissus*, *Fritillaria*, hyacinths, or any other bulb that you enjoy.

The potted bulbs had been planted in the autumn and kept in an unheated coldframe over the winter. Compost was heaped up on the edges of the bulb pot to hide it. Around the bulb pot was planted *Heuchera* 'Frosted Violet', bronze fennel, burgundy wallflowers (*Erysimum* 'Vulcan'), deep red flowering *Ranunculus*, and purple sage. Cut stems of red-twigged dogwood (*Cornus alba* 'Elegantissima') were stuck in and arranged to support the wallflowers and complement the red theme. The red twigs also added color and height very early in the season before the other plants began to grow. *Ranunculus* thrived in the cold weather and added color before the show of the tulips. The tulips grew up through the twigs and wallflowers to



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Early in the season, the tulips take center stage in this combination that includes a few perennials including *Heuchera* 'Frosted Violet' and *Euphorbia amygdaloides* 'Purpurea' with its chartreuse bracts.

bloom beautifully.

After blooming, the tulips were deadheaded and the dying *Ranunculus* removed, their places easily concealed by the expanded *Heuchera* foliage, allowing the wallflowers to take center stage. As the weather warmed, the wallflowers continued to bloom, hiding the dying tulip foliage. A simple



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A dramatic *Crinum asiaticum* var. *asiaticum* 'Splendens' takes the place of the spent tulips in late spring as the other plants expand and spill out of the container.



photo ©Jonathan Wright

As the fennel and wallflowers began to bolt, they were removed and replaced with heat loving plants. *Heuchera* foliage remains, adding to the combination and taking it into early summer with a full effect.

lifting of the spent tulip pot allowed for easy planting of a burgundy-leaved spider-lily (*Crinum asiaticum* var. *asiaticum* 'Splendens').

A few weeks later when the heat finally arrived, I removed the bronze fennel, purple sage, and wallflowers. Planting the openings filled the container immediately. Plants added for the summer were South African Cape rush (*Chondropetalum tectorum*), burgundy-leaved *Aeonium* 'Plum Purdy', *Begonia boliviensis* 'Bonfire', coral fountain (*Russelia equisetiformis* 'St. Elmo's Fire'), and a trailing narrow-leaved waffle plant (*Hemigraphis repanda*). This container will continue to look great all the way through summer into autumn.

With a little bit of extra planning and this slight shift in planting technique, I feel that I have improved the transition between the spring and summer shows in the garden. In the process, I've also saved myself a little bit of stress. I hope sharing these experiences will do the same for you.



A self-professed plant geek since childhood, **Jonathan Wright** serves as the horticulturist in charge of the Main House and Terrace Gardens at Chanticleer, a pleasure garden in Wayne, PA. A graduate of the Longwood Gardens Professional Gardener Program, Jonathan went on to intern at the former Heronswood Nursery in Kingston, WA. He then accepted a position as Chanticleer Fellow, which has allowed him to work alongside talented gardeners, both at Chanticleer and in some of the greatest gardens in North America.

Jonathan leads classes and workshops for PHS and Longwood Gardens, as well as lectures for gardens farther afield. When he isn't in the garden, he can most often be found in the kitchen where he enjoys preparing meals with fresh seasonal ingredients.

Editor's Note: For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.