

LEADER

A practical solution for soft landscaping



Earlier this year, research by London in Bloom trustee and horticultural consultant Peter Holman revealed planting of bedding by local authorities in London had crashed by between 30 and 50 per cent over the past ten years.

While concerns over sustainability were blamed by some for this dramatic decommissioning of bedding, most agree that the real reason has been the steady decline in council planting budgets, exacerbated by a loss of horticultural skill within many council departments.

Thankfully, the picture was not so bad outside the capital, with local authorities north of Birmingham in particular continuing to maintain substantial schemes, often in connection with the RHS's In Bloom competition. But as council managers brace themselves

“Even some of our most cherished schemes will find themselves under pressure”

for the worst round of spending cuts yet, there can be little doubt that even some of our most cherished schemes are going to find themselves under pressure.

As Trafford Council sustainability and green space strategy manager Petula Neilson told an HTA seminar on soft landscaping in development

schemes last week, local authorities have been extremely apprehensive about adopting new soft landscaping and planting schemes due to concerns over maintenance costs (p6).

Hence the rapt attention paid by more than 300 landscape designers and local authority managers at last week's Palmstead soft landscaping seminar to Dutch nurseryman Bert Griffioen (p3). With his bold system of closely packed, carefully nourished and scrupulously selected perennial planting, Griffioen appears to have figured out one way to rescue at least some of our cash-strapped public spaces from having every inch of colour drained from them by offering a cost-effective planting solution.

The system, which has been tried and tested in urban schemes in Holland and elsewhere on the continent over the past few years, will need careful trialling here to be sure it can work as well with our different weather and soil conditions – work that Palmstead hopes to encourage through upcoming talks with Griffioen. What's for sure, at a time when practical solutions are urgently being sought, is that we will be hearing more.

Kate Lowe, editor. Email: kate.lowe@haymarket.com

» www.HorticultureWeek.co.uk/leader for recent leaders

LETTERS

Conservation focus should be broader to help biodiversity

I read your article “Golfing for wildlife” (HW, 17 September) with great interest. I agree that conservation should now be our top priority to achieve a greater biodiversity.

The focus should include other areas – parks, schools, local authority sites – and, may I suggest, even supermarket car parks have areas that could be turned into managed wildlife areas.

I am a contract manager working on a local authority contract in London. I currently manage more than one-million square metres. Predominately, these areas are managed to a specification intensively to keep the sites neat and tidy. A lot of this management is done using large machinery and herbicides.

Last year, my client and I had a meeting to discuss alternative management for potential areas on various sites with the thought of developing wildlife areas. We discussed initial costs and possible areas on sites and full management plan. We came up with three initial sites last year, which we have developed with great success and are continuing to expand and develop.

This year we are looking to develop another two to three sites. It is not as costly as people think and, if managed correctly, gives the sites more interest and encourages wildlife (bees, butterflies, moths and other insects), which in turn increases bird and animal life.

On one of our sites we have been very lucky to find a bee orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) without any human interven-

tion and it has started to colonise within the area. Let's bring the countryside back into London.

Nigel Glogan, contract manager

Fairer taxation is essential to support horticulture industry

As a person very much involved in horticulture, it is time the UK had parity with Europe with VAT limited to five or six per cent as on the continent in Belgium and Holland. All plant life's blood is carbon dioxide, the “think green” resolve carbon neutral and I am imploring the NFU and the trade press to lobby hard.

Horticulture and agriculture legislation, planning and taxation are loading against the industry. All business needs to be encouraged by more straightforward, fairer taxation. We all know we have to pay tax for public expenditure, but most hard-working people object to paying high taxes so that many people can live a good life without lifting a finger to help themselves.

I fear seven million on unemployment benefit by May 2011. Those who are on Job Seekers Allowance should be made to do work for the community for the money they get in benefit, as in the USA and Scandinavia.

Not a single politician of any party recognises the return to UK prosperity is by producing and manufacturing goods that other countries want to buy. There has been no change in policy with the change in Government to the regret of much of the commercial nation.

JET Shirley, Victoriana Nursery Gardens, Ashford, Kent

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Cost-saving perennial planting system offers help to hard-pressed council teams

By news staff

A system for using perennial plants in public space that has succeeded in cutting rather than raising soft landscape maintenance costs was hailed as little short of revolutionary by attendees at a seminar held last week on dynamic planting.

Outlining the system to garden and landscape designers invited to the Palmstead Nurseries annual soft landscaping workshop was its creator, Dutch nurseryman Bert Griffioen.

The system involves dense planting of tried and tested varieties that are then cut right back each spring to promote a fuller flush of sturdy growth that will smother weeds.

"The objection [from Dutch local authorities] to using perennials in public space was maintenance," said Griffioen, who began developing the system around five years ago. "We said, if we can save you money, will you have it? And they said yes."

He added: "We have done it in a lot of municipalities and now, three



Dense planting:
fuller flush of
sturdy growth

and four years on, we are getting repeat orders as we have proved that the maintenance of perennials can be handled at very low cost."

Stressing that the system could only work if it was followed to the letter, Griffioen said lack of knowledge about soil preparation among local authority managers and landscape architects was a key obstacle. "An early problem we hit was failure to prepare the soil and fertilise it," he told the audience.

Griffioen uses a 10-15cm layer of mushroom compost and black peat with initial plantings to gain an "airy" soil consistency. After the plants are cut in March, a natural



Griffioen:
system's creator

BERT GRIFFIOEN'S PERENNIALS SYSTEM

Required conditions

- Knowledge of the area's requirements
- Soil handling or replacement
- Choice of assortment
- Design with large planting areas per sort
- Dense planting with large, high-quality plants
- Maintenance plan
- Thinking from management

Advantages

- Lower costs per year
- Better maintenance planning
- Quick results
- Better public safety
- Better appearance

Disadvantages

- Primary investment
- Expensive appearance
- Disinterest/lack of care

fertiliser is used. Two-and-a-half weeks after cutting the perennials back, the beds become completely green again with new plant growth.

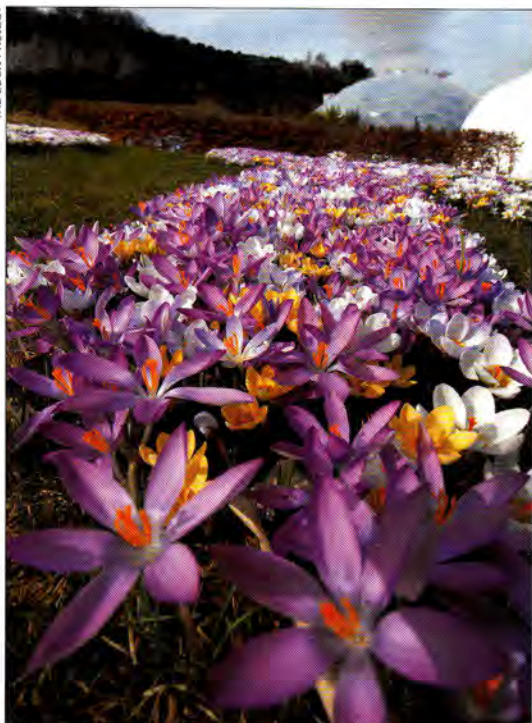
According to Griffioen, local authorities that had had no choice but to give up on using bedding plants because of budget cuts have found his perennials system an affordable alternative to simply grassing over.

"Bedding plants are changed three times a year and in Holland at a cost of £23-£24 per square

metre, which equates to £60-£65 per per square metre a year. Perennials cost £30-£35 only once, so there is an enormous saving."

Palmstead Nurseries marketing manager Nick Coslett said the nursery was talking to Griffioen about how it might make the system available to local authorities in the UK and how it could be made to work with the UK's different weather and soil conditions.

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THE EDEN PROJECT

Purple haze Some 10,000 purple crocus bulbs are to be planted at the Eden Project to highlight a campaign to eradicate polio. Up to 250 children from local schools, youth groups and clubs will take part in the "Big Bulb Plant" on 2 October as part of a nationwide campaign organised by Rotary International in Great Britain and Ireland. The rotary clubs are encouraging people to plant five million bulbs nationwide. Purple crocuses have been chosen to represent the purple colour applied to children's fingers when they are immunised against polio.

Sustainability scales client agenda

Private clients are increasingly aware of sustainability issues such as the need to contain the movement of soil within their plot, designer Andrew Wilson told delegates to the Palmstead Nursery soft landscaping day.

Wilson, who is head of the London College of Garden Design, said there was no doubt sustainability was "gradually creeping into the minds of clients", making it much more workable as opposed to when it is imposed by the designer.

The movement of soil, he said, was now a regular question at briefing stage, as was harvesting rain water.

He also highlighted the desire for low-maintenance planting as a second key trend in his talk on the future of garden design. Declaring

the "English paradigm" a thing of the past, he said the main drawback was the maintenance level.

"The National Trust produces hugely well-maintained versions across the country," but as far as clients were concerned, "gardens that need a small army of gardeners to maintain are a thing of the past," he added.

He argued that designers should not underestimate the impact of technology and as work and leisure boundaries blurred, gardens were becoming flexible spaces as well as pleasurable and technical spaces.

Committed gardeners were in the minority of garden owners while eco-gardeners were now a main plank of garden design. Wilson also identified the hands-free gardener "driven by lack of space".