

# Rich pickings

A cutting garden provides joy – and inspiration – by the armful for visitors to Esther Schonenberg’s nursery in the Netherlands

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The cutting garden is glorious in August, and an irresistible pull to customers keen to discover new plants and create their own bouquets.

**W**alk into the main greenhouse and sales space of Festina Lente, Esther Schonenberg’s beautiful nursery just outside Leiden in the Netherlands, in August, and you’re greeted by an unusual sight. Yes, there are rustic pallets brimming with pots and trays of beautiful plants; yes, there’s an irresistible view over the garden beyond and, yes, there are deep bowls of bulbs with which to plan imaginative spring displays – but there’s something more too. On the countertop are vases bursting with stunning displays of cut flowers. They’re not for sale. It’s even better than that – they are there to encourage you to pick your own bouquet in the cutting garden outside.

“People always come back smiling from the cutting garden,” says Esther. And well they might; who wouldn’t enjoy an hour spent gathering armfuls of dahlias, crocosmias, phlox, cosmos, nicotianas, salvias, persicaria and tagetes? For some, the joy is in the simple act of picking. For others it’s the amazement of finding such a colourful and floriferous garden this late in the season. And for others still, it’s the delight of discovering a plant they didn’t know. “Every year we plant 20 or 30 new varieties,” says Esther, “so there are always surprises.”

Esther first began growing plants in 2001, having started a business running workshops making plant-based decorations. “I couldn’t find any interesting flowers that I wanted to use, so I sowed some annuals to see what would happen.” She quickly realised she enjoyed this far more than the workshops and so, having brought in her good friend and equally keen gardener Joke Durieux to help, the nursery was born.

Though annuals were – and remain – their first love, thanks to their long flowering time and the ‘sparkle’ and excitement they bestow on the garden, the pair soon discovered that many gardeners have eyes only for perennials and so added these to the mix, still with an eye for the unusual, the deliciously fragrant, long-flowering or rare. After six years renting space from a dahlia farmer (who still takes cuttings of his unique crosses for them each year) they moved to their current site in 2010, and renamed the business Festina Lente. “It’s Latin for ‘make haste slowly,’” explains Esther. “It reflects the way we work, naturally and without pesticides or artificial growing media.”

The plants may grow at their own pace but Esther and Joke are always busy with plans and ideas. On moving in, their first priority was to plant the garden that they’d always dreamed of. “We wanted to be able to show our customers mature plants in a garden setting and in interesting combinations,” says Esther. Thanks to their efforts, August, a month when many gardens begin to plateau, sees it at its height.

“We find that many people will only buy plants when they’re in flower,” says Joke. “And that most buy their plants in spring, keen to have their gardens looking good after winter.” Inevitably, this means that after an early summer peak, they begin to decline, especially if their owners then go on holiday in late June or July. It also means that many later-flowering plants, particularly annuals, which flower and then die in a single season, never get a look in at all. Happily, Esther has some simple solutions: “Visit nurseries at different times of year,” she ▸



On the nursery lawn plants for sale, including *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Dazzler', *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Purity' and *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' are arranged in combinations to inspire.

▷ says. "Choose plants with a long flowering period. Plant annuals, dahlias, salvias and grasses to add interest throughout the year, and cut back early flowering plants to encourage a second flush."

It's a formula that brings spectacular results in the Festina Lente garden, where imposing stands of grasses – molinias, stipas and panicums – and statuesque perennials – veronicastrums, eupatoriums, *Helianthus salicifolius* and loosestrifes – form the backbone of the colour-themed plantings, with annuals, biennials and perennials swapped in to keep things interesting. Once autumn-planted wallflowers have gone over in late May or early June, then eschscholzias or salvias might take their place. In August, the strong colours of dahlias and atriplex catch the eye, along with clouds of nicotiana and cosmos, with asters waiting in the wings to take over the display as they fade.

"The garden is an investment for us," says Esther. "When people come to visit several times a season, they see what is possible in a garden and, maybe, they decide to make some changes in their own garden." "Not all of them know what they see," laughs Joke, "but they do see what they're missing." ▢

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Festina Lente tuin, 1e Mientlaan 13, 2223 LG Katwijk, the Netherlands.

Website [festinalentetuin.nl](http://festinalentetuin.nl)

Open 4 March to 14 October, Thursday to Saturday, 10am-5pm.

Turn the page for planting combinations

## 8 of Esther and Joke's favourites

### 1 *Alonsoa meridionalis* 'Apricot'

A late-flowering annual with delicate flowers and colour. "It's a shame it doesn't flower earlier, as so few people see it," says Esther. 60cm. USDA 9a-11.

### 2 *Peucedanum verticillare*

"This grows so strong you can park your bike against it," laughs Esther. Sometimes flowers in its second or third year, then dies. 2m. USDA 5a-9a.

### 3 *Agastache nepetoides* 'Green Candles'

A short-lived perennial that's great for winter structure. "It's a good colour and seems to fit in anywhere," says Esther. 1.5m.

### 4 *Hibiscus cannabinus*

A tall, relatively unknown annual smothered in flowers from late July onwards. "It's a big hit in the cutting garden," says Esther, "but the blooms fade quickly." 1.8m. USDA 9a-11.

### 5 *Gaillardia x grandiflora* 'Burgunder'

This short-lived perennial flowers from late April to the first frosts. Pretty pincushion seedheads follow the burgundy flowers. 60cm. USDA 3a-9b.

### 6 *Tagetes patula*

seed selection African marigolds are often looked down upon, but this long flowering form, with tall stems supporting single, red flowers, never disappoints. Half-hardy annual. 45cm. USDA 2a-11.

### 7 *Agrostis nebulosa*

An annual grass that never fails to amaze with how it can produce such an imposing cloud from one tiny seed. 45cm.

### 8 *Anemonopsis macrophylla*

"I love these like my babies," laughs Joke. "They're good in shade and have such wonderful structure. Beautiful flowers and buds too." 1m. USDA 4a-9b.



\*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.

## Combinations for late-summer planting



**Purple haze** Similarly coloured plants of differing heights create movement. Both *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination' (1) and *Verbena bonariensis* (2) are tall and the first to catch the eye, while the mid-height, burgundy buttons of *Sanguisorba* 'Beetlewings' (3) and pink spires of *Agastache* 'Tutti-frutti' (4) lead the eye across the border. *Lythrum salicaria* 'Morden Pink' (5) and the shapely leaves and pompom flowers of *Ricinus communis* (6) add spikes and balls of colour.



**Shadow play** Light and shade are key to this border's success, with dense grasses and deep foliage contrasting with pale, delicate, flower heads. *Nicotiana sylvestris* (1), *Dahlia* 'Twynings After Eight' (2) and *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Pink Glow' (3) shine out, while *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' (4) creates a darker block. *Achillea millefolium* 'White Beauty' (5) and *Gaura lindheimeri* (6) add further elements of lightness.



**Hot shots** This border offers a full-on sensory experience in fiery colours, including *Eupatorium rugosum* 'Chocolate' (1), *Hemerocallis* 'Burning Daylight' (2), the glowing spears of *Pennisetum amplexicaulis* 'Firedance' (3) and one of Esther and Joke's own dahlia selections, as yet unnamed (4). The smoky panicles of *Pennisetum orientale* 'Karley Rose' (5) provide a softer counterpoint, and a muted backdrop, against which the neon-pink petals of *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Dazzler' (6) glow.



**Tutti frutti** Strong clumps of tall grasses form the bones of this border, with a generous peppering of flowers to provide some colour. These include *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Diane' (1), the yellow *Coreopsis* 'Full Moon' (2), *Echinacea purpurea* (3) and *Echinacea purpurea* 'Wild Swan' (4). Grasses are included in a variety of greens from the bright *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Magic' (5) to the red-tinged *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw' (6).