A Touch of Bressingham
My Colorful Island Beds

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Shortly before I moved from a city lot to a sunny acre, I visited English gardens for inspiration. Bressingham Gardens, founded by Alan Bloom, was a highlight of that trip. With a huge weeping willow for backdrop, dozens of island beds glowed with color from perennials, many of them newly introduced by Bloom. I photographed madly and scribbled botanical names in a notebook. Spikes of pink and purple *Penstemon*, screaming orange *Kniphofia*, spires of blue *Campanula*, and domes of purple *Allium* were among the stars of that summer day.

Back home I contemplated my backyard—a huge stretch of field grass, mown into something resembling a lawn—and noticed a bald area roughly the size of an RV. Neighbors confirmed that, yes, the previous owner had parked an RV there. Hmmm. This could be my first island bed! I enlarged the space into a circle, applied a generous amount of compost, and started planting—*Delphinium, Penstemon, Veronica, Geranium, Dianthus, Lavatera*. I loved that island bed so much that I carved out another one each year until there were four.

For a while all those flowers were exciting, but eventually I realized color wasn’t enough. No matter how many perennials I packed into

Purple-leaved *heuchera*, and other low-growing foliage plants, provide a frame for the author’s island beds.
each island, three problems stared me in the face. Each island sat unmoored, floating in a sea of lawn. Also, as I walked around each perimeter, everything was visible; there were no hiding places for faded flowers or tattered leaves. And the edges of the islands were a mess, with billowing perennials spilling out onto the lawn where the mower and edger shredded them.

Anchoring the Island
Grounding the floating islands turned out be easy enough—once I added some ceramic ornaments. I discovered the solution accidentally, when an artist friend brought over some ceramic sculptures for an art show in the garden. Those standing figures within the islands helped anchor the beds. Later on, I bought ceramic birdbaths and large ceramic containers, placing their solid forms off-center in three of the islands for contrast with the softer-textured plants. A tall obelisk covered with dark purple ‘Romantica’ served the same purpose in the fourth island.

Selecting Tidier Plants
Tackling the messiness of spent foliage and faded flowers was more challenging. I took a hard look at the sloppier perennials and got tough, removing them in favor of those that looked good longer. For example, I love daylilies for masses of color in July, but a favorite—burgundy ‘Strutter’s Ball’—has foliage that rapidly bleaches. I replaced it with ‘Bela Lugosi’, which I found just as vivid, with leaves that stay fresh. Yellow-green ‘Green Flutter’, medium-yellow ‘Butter Cream’, and brilliant-yellow ‘Self Propelled’ are similarly well-behaved. I also removed Campanula persicifolia, as the spent flowers turned brown. I substituted Veronica longifolia, which offers sturdy stems covered with lilac-blue summer flowers, followed by green seedpods that are ornamental in their own right.

Framing the Island
Shapely leaves are especially important near the edge of a bed, preferably bearing upright flowers that won’t get chopped off by the mower. Cultivars of Heuchera with colorful foliage make a handsome frame. Darker leaves are best for full sun, while golden ones need shade. Upright sedums like ‘Matrona’ and ‘Touchdown Teak’ have dark, succulent leaves that look great from the time they emerge in late spring until frost. I love ‘Elsie’s Gold’ for its green, slightly jagged leaves with yellow-green centers, especially combined with yellow flowers.
With a good frame, masses of perennials with less interesting foliage and long-lasting flowers dress up the islands. Varieties of blue and purple Salvia (especially 'Black and Blue'); pink, orange and blue cultivars of Agastache; orange, yellow and red-orange Kniphofia; and red, pink and white hybrids of perennial Hibiscus make a splendid display.

**A Few Final Discoveries**

In the early years, I tried to include perennials for all seasons in the island beds, which gave me a long sequence of bloom, but only a smattering of color for each month. Since the islands were in the backyard and mostly enjoyed in summer and fall, I concentrated on perennials for those times. For a small winter lift, I planted dwarf conifers in the large ceramic pots within the islands.

As the islands filled out, I noticed that two were half in sun and half in shade. Daylilies on the shady side were leaning towards the sun, while hostas on the sunny side were burning. So I moved the hostas to the shady side, adding ferns and saxifrages to accompany them, and moved the daylilies to the sunny side, where they combined well with already existing Coreopsis and Veronica.

Gardening at its best is an ongoing experiment, as we try out various combinations and see how we like them. When I started my fourth island, I was feeling especially adventurous and chose three re-blooming ‘Radway Sunrise’ roses as the anchor plants. They’re flamboyant—a blend of luminous orange and pink, much like the Agastache that accompany them. To balance out the heat, I planted blue Agapanthus and filled in with plenty of Salvia ‘Black and Blue’ and Geranium ‘Rozanne’. It’s my favorite place to sit and watch the hummingbirds, butterflies and bees flit from flower to flower.

I’m so glad that my first trip to England included that life-changing visit to Bressingham. Allan Bloom passed away in 2005 at the age of 99, but he lives on in my garden.

**Barbara Blossom Ashmun** has written seven gardening books, most recently “Love Letters to My Garden,” a collection of essays about the joys and wonders, disappointments and transformations that color a gardener’s life. She wrote a column for the “Portland Tribune” from 2004 through 2011 and was a contributing editor for “Fine Gardening” for many years. Her essays have appeared in “GreenPrints,” “Pacific Horticulture,” the “Chicken Soup” series, and “Women Reinvented.”