

Introduction to Naturalistic Planting

If you are interested in Naturalistic Planting in your garden, this guide can be used as a starting point. At the end of this brief guide I have listed some recommended reading that provide further advice and guidance. The most important thing is to have fun and experiment with this style of planting.

Naturalistic planting design is a low maintenance style with a long season of interest; flowering can occur starting early April through until late October. You can use native species or more typical garden plants and the planting can be adapted to any sized garden in sun or shade. It is a *low (resources) input, high impact* planting style, both in terms of benefits to wildlife and visual beauty.

No artificial fertilizers, manure or compost are added to the soil, instead plants are chosen to work with the conditions that are *naturally* present on site.

Example Planting Site

By planting a wide variety of different species mixed together, the planting can self-adapt to changing site conditions such as variations in soil type/moisture, compaction, and amount of sun & shade (as surrounding trees get larger). The plants can spread and seed themselves into their preferred location within the planting.

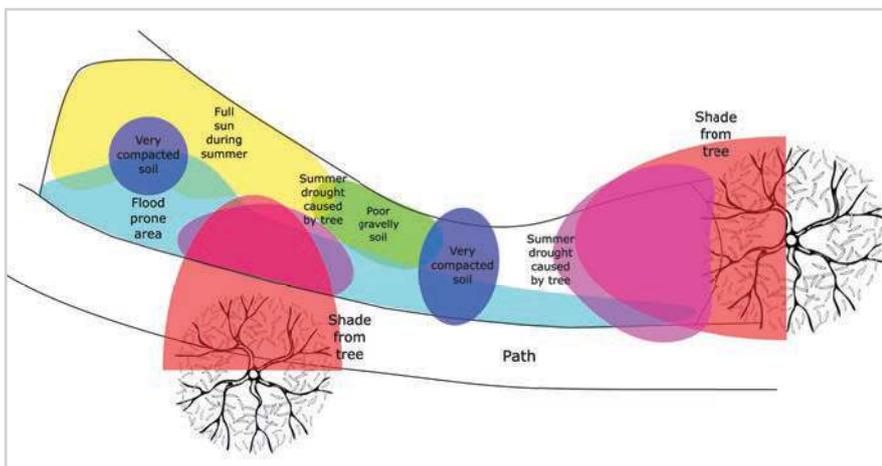


Diagram to demonstrate example of various conditions that may be present in proposed planting site.

It would be difficult to accurately match species to all the different conditions present across the site.

With naturalistic planting you work with the concept of phenology which describes the seasonal changes on a plant's life cycle over a year; when it grows, flowers, and what happens after flowering.

The planting is layered, starting with short growing, shade tolerant, spring flowering species. Taller species are selected for summer flowering and taller still for autumn; each progressive layer submerging the earlier flowering species.



April



May / June



July



August/September



Example Planting

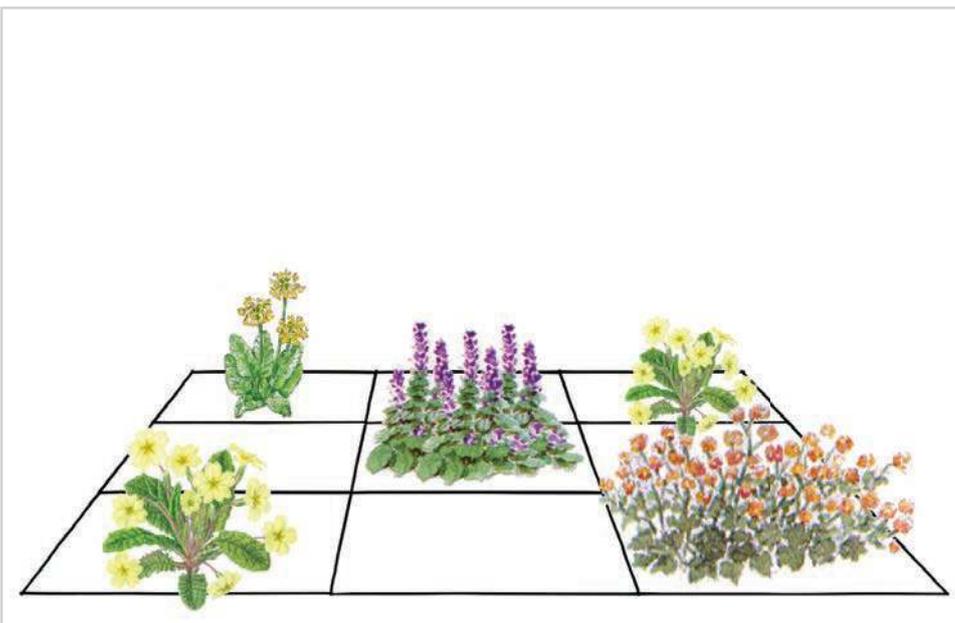
The below example and chosen plants are for a moist, productive soil as we have at Rushen Abbey, Ballasalla.



To plant a naturalistic bed or border start by dividing the planting area into *one* metre squares. **Nine** plants will be *randomly* distributed into **each** one square metre.

Planting area divided into one square metres using string line.

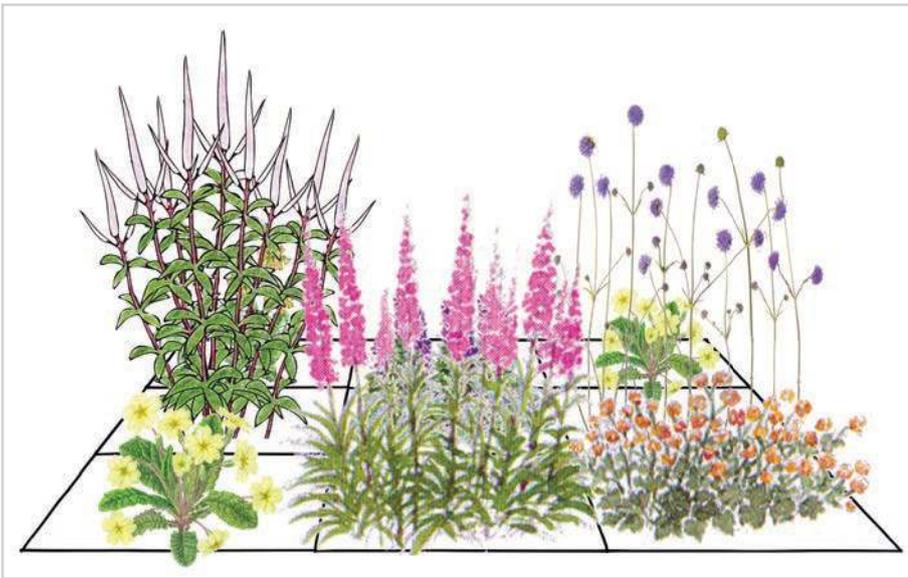
Start with a shade tolerant spring flowering base layer; this is a functional layer, the chosen plants (that need to be evergreen or early into leaf) shade the soil preventing weed seed from germinating. These flower early, so are small.



You will need five plants:

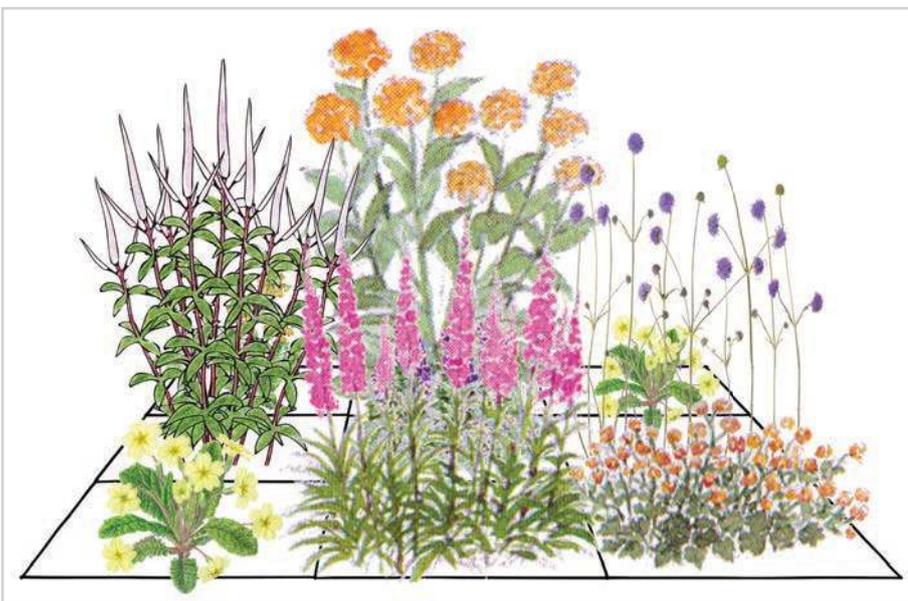
- 2 Primula vulgaris
- 1 Primula veris
- 1 Ajuga reptans
- 1 Geum coccineum Cultivar

*Area showing **one** square metre.*



Next, choose three summer flowering species, one each for early, mid, and late summer flowering.

- 1 Veronicastrum virgatum Cultivar
- 1 Lythrum virgatum Cultivar
- 1 Succisa pratensis



Finally, choose one autumn flowering species.

- 1 Rudbeckia subtomentosa

Growth / Flower Form

To create a diverse meadow like mix, use clump forming plants, particularly where the flowers are *held up high on leafless stems*, so the plant does not shade the lower growing spring flowering layer too much. The choice of species should work with site, soil, and climate conditions.



Sanguisorba



Agapanthus



Succisa



Lythrum



Molinia

Use a variety of different flower forms, such as Buttons, Umbels, Spires, and Daisies to attract a wide variety of different pollinating insects.





Button - Astrantia



Umbel - Achillea



Spire - Salvia



Daisy - Leucanthemum

Pick species that will coexist together to form a plant community. Don't pick aggressive spreading plants that will dominate the planting and reduce biodiversity. The selected species should be robust and not require staking or plant supports to stop them from flopping over.

Reading / Websites

Naturalistic Planting Design - The Essential Guide: How to Design High-Impact, Low-Input Gardens - Nigel Dunnett | 2019

Dream Plants for the Natural Garden - Piet Oudolf and Henk Gerritsen | 2000

Planting in a Post-Wild World - Thomas Rainer and Claudia West | 2015

Planting: A New Perspective - Piet Oudolf and Noel Kingsbury | 2013

<https://www.inaturalist.org> - click on 'Research Grade' to see photos of plants in natural habitat for inspiration.