

Riotous assembly



Right and far right: flame-like *Crococsmia* 'Lucifer'; the colour-themed beds radiate out from a central point



Below and below right: sunflower 'Velvet Queen' provides height and rich hues; orange lilies add a vibrant fanfare



Left and above: climbing *Ipomoea lobata* brings an exotic touch; *Hemerocallis* 'Baja' creates a sea of blooms

One of Kew's most popular displays, the Colour Spectrum is a vibrant delight all summer. **John Lonsdale** explains how it all comes together

Above: wine-red *Astrantia major* 'Hadspen Blood' thrives in full sun in the red/blue bed

Throughout the summer, sumptuous colour cascades across an expanse of grass just beyond the Orangery, near Kew Palace. The Colour Spectrum – a series of nine beds radiating from a central point – is hugely popular with both people and bees. Created in 2000 for the Year of Colour festival, the Colour Spectrum is alive with the busy snapping of camera shutters at the height of the season, as visitors try to capture its abundant paint-box glory.

The Colour Spectrum's three narrow, ribbon-shaped beds are planted with annual and herbaceous plants in primary colours.

Then beside the red, blue and yellow ribbons, wider beds swirl out, each planted with a subtle arrangement of flowers, graduating from the primary colour through various shades before reaching the next primary colour.

But this is far from being a formulaic or even a formal arrangement of plants. And it's perhaps the only place at Kew where plants are treated not as individual specimens but as colours on a painter's palette. The subtle juxtapositions of colours and textures are a delight, and often surprise even its designers.

The success of these combinations lies in the wide range of plants used. Unusually for

Kew the scheme depends, to a large extent, on annual plants used in an informal way. Herbaceous and bulbous plants make up the remainder, with just a few flowering shrubs adding colour. Large, dramatic forms punctuate the beds at intervals. There's little of the conventional tiered herbaceous border here – the strong stems of sunflower 'Moonwalker' support the wiry stems of purple fennel, with its clouds of tiny green-yellow blooms. Robust towering angelica shelters the shell-like pea-green flowers of bells of Ireland (*Moluccella laevis*), the graceful wisps of squirrel-tail grass (*Hordeum jubatum*) and pineapple-like inflorescences of *Eucomis bicolor*. Vegetables spring unexpectedly from the petal-shaped beds – rich red-stemmed 'Rhubarb' chard enlivens the red/blue bed, and 'Lollo Rossa' lettuce continues the theme.

There is no way that a feature of this scale – it's the size of a football pitch and contains about 7,000 plants in up to 300 varieties – could be added to the workload of the existing gardeners, so it's maintained under contract by Landform. My colleague Steve Ruddy and I prepared the concept and initial plans, while Lucinda Burgess and Toby Smith, known for their work on National Trust gardens, were responsible for the original plant selection. The first year proved how successful the feature could be. By mid-summer the site was transformed. Where for two centuries there had been nothing but grass, there were flowers in every imaginable hue.

We now have five seasons of experience. Landform still maintains the Colour Spectrum and its staff are highly skilled in this specialist work. Sarah Allan, one of the first gardeners to work on the feature, has become a walking encyclopaedia on it, always ready to answer visitors' questions. She now plans the planting, sources the plants and acts as an adviser. Ian Sturgess, who began as a volunteer and enjoyed it so much that he became a horticulturist, took the garden over two years ago and maintains the high horticultural standards established by Sarah, assisted by four part-time volunteers. "Working among these plants has taught me so much about them," says Ian. "It's the best way to gain expertise and knowledge."

Meticulous planning is also vital to the success of the garden. Throughout the summer, Ian and Sarah make notes and take photographs to monitor the plants. "It can change a lot in two weeks," says Sarah, "as there's always something new coming on. We also note down how the plants stand up to drought and wind, as it's quite an exposed site." She begins to plant at the end of October,



Top row, from left: the beds are a masterful blend of heights, hues and textures; *Verbascum 'Cotswold Cream'*

Right and far right: put your sunglasses on for California poppy 'Sun Shades'; love-in-a-mist, with its feathery foliage



Right: the rich colour of *Verbena 'Quartz Blue'* creates an eye-catching splash at the front of the green/blue border

Below, left to right: a scabious gradually unfurls; mauve *Verbena bonariensis* with fennel; starry *Allium schubertii*



Below, left to right: *Gaura lindheimeri* 'Siskiyou Pink' blooms on long stems; 'Red Boy' is a fine, tall cornflower

Right: lime-green annual *Bupleurum rotundifolium* 'Green Gold' is sown outdoors from mid-spring



Bottom row, left to right: *Malope trifida* 'Glacier Fruits' is a hardy annual; vibrant spikes of *Salvia coccinea* 'Lady in Red'



Above, left to right: bees adore sky-blue borage; *Scaevola* 'Blue Fan'; frilly *Stokesia laevis* 'Blue Star' with lavender

Left: the multi-coloured spires of *Lupinus hartwegii* ssp. *cruickshankii* 'Sunrise' reach a stately 1m tall



Right: the dazzling Colour Spectrum lights up what was once a plain expanse of lawn near Kew Palace



once the last of the display has been cleared. "I have to plan a progression of planting and flowering to last from mid-May to the end of September. John and Steve contribute their ideas, and we select plants not only for their colour and flowering season but also for their form, height and texture." She pencils in the selection on the master plan, with plenty of foliage plants such as herbs, chard and fennel to set off the flowers.

In November, once the plants have been selected and entered into a database, Sarah orders the seed. Then she creates two sowing schedules – one for hardy annuals, which Ian sows directly into the beds in succession from March through the summer; the other for Kew horticulturist Richard Helliwell, who starts the half-hardy annuals off indoors.

The complex planning needed to create such a sophisticated and riotous succession of colour may seem a bit like playing 3D chess, but Sarah says it's got easier with time and experience. "At the start of the season you're faced with a daunting expanse of bare soil. We mark out with a hoe where the seeds and plants will go, but if we're to get the effect and impact we want we have to visualise it in flower as we mark it out from the plan."

Some plants and plant associations have been a great success and are well worth trying in your own garden. In particular, *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Mainacht' ('May Night') combined with feathery deep-blue *Trachelium caeruleum* 'Passion in Violet', or the unusual scarlet tassels of the annual daisy *Emilia coccinea* 'Scarlet Magic' growing through the yellow-green flowers of fennel or dill.

You could also try towering pale-yellow sunflowers, such as 'Moonwalker', which look amazing on dull days or in moonlight. The exotic-looking red and cream climber *Ipomoea* (formerly *Mina*) *lobata* deserves to be far better known, as does its pale-yellow selection 'Citronella'. But not all plants need showy colours to impress – the vibrant green, starry flowers of *Bupleurum rotundifolium* 'Green Gold' have proved extremely popular with visitors and are great as a foil for other plants, or for cutting.

This year the Colour Spectrum will be in bloom throughout Kew's heritage festival, so several plants have been included to reflect the theme, such as original dahlias that were first introduced to this country in the reign of George III. There are also some new varieties of old favourites, such as the sunflower 'Prado Red'. The Colour Spectrum is already bursting into its seasonal spectacular, a tapestry of ever-changing colour and an experience not to be missed on summer visits. ♣

John Lonsdale is head of public programmes at Kew