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We Must Count on Policy Change to Halt Obsolete Housing Rate

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From left, Clematis 'Prince Charles', Fuchsia magellanica, Dahlia 'Ivanetti' and a display of cut dahlias, tobacco flowers and penstemon

Stuck in the middle

Compared to the spectacular floral shows of spring and autumn, the summer months can be an anticlimax. Here's how to keep things blooming all season

RACHEL de THAME GARDENS



When I finally returned to my own garden in Gloucestershire after the flower shows that take me away from home for much of late spring and midsummer, I found it drab in comparison to the colour-saturated show gardens, where every plant is at its peak. Of course, I'm still in the early stages of developing it, and it's more than a little neglected during my absences.

The seasonal imbalance will improve as I gradually address the structure and planting. And when I visit other gardens, I see plenty of good-looking plants peaking now. The high-summer lull can be avoided – or at least mitigated – by the addition of a few well-chosen shrubs, perennials or climbers. At the very least, it's possible to make a big difference by shopping for a few fillers.

Show gardens are mostly just that: for show. In a real garden, one aims to spread interest evenly throughout the year. It's a tall order, especially in the no man's land of mid- to late July. It's now that we find ourselves wishing we'd done some things differently earlier in the year.

If only we'd sown more annuals, our garden would be a riot of colour – and for the price of a few packets of seed. If only we'd used the "Chelsea chop" on our perennials, cutting some of them back so their flowers emerge later in the season, often in greater quantities on shorter, sturdier stems. But spring is an exceptionally busy time in the garden. It's easy to forget to make provision for the weeks and months ahead.

So, while our gardens have paused, we should make a note in the diary, reminding ourselves to order seed for next year. Top of the list should be cosmos. These daisy-like plants will flower nonstop from midsummer into autumn. Several shades of pink and mauve are available in single and double forms, but my long-term favourite remains the elegant, pure white *C. bipinnatus* 'Purity'. Add to this the



Right, top row, Dahlia 'Karma Fuchsiana' and the daisy-like Erigeron karvinskianus. Centre, Gaura lindheimeri. Bottom, Perovskia 'Blue Spire'

pinchusion flowers of *Scabiosa atropurpurea* 'Summer Berries', *Cleome hassleriana* 'Violet Queen', antirrhinum and zinnia, and the colour clashes will be almost blinding. The key to continuous blooms is to deadhead regularly and assiduously. The more you leave to go to seed, the sooner flowering will decline.

Annuals do an admirable job of sustaining colour and interest through the summer. But that's for next year. For now, there's no shame in shopping to fill the gaps – and, if the basic structure and foliage interest is in place, it doesn't take much to make a significant difference.

A trip to the garden centre will yield pots of cheerful marguerite daisies,

scented pinks and tumbling calibrachoa: pick them into containers for an instant pick-me-up.

Some of my favourite shrubs, climbers and perennials also have their time to shine during this "lull". And you can pick them up and get them in the ground now – specialist nurseries will have the widest choice. If you have a few of these in your beds, you'll be assured of colour through midsummer and beyond.

RECOMMENDED PLANTS

Clematis 'Prince Charles' Flowering from the end of June for up to eight weeks, this is one of my desert-island varieties. The

soft blue flowers work with most other shades and are just showy enough, without being flashy. Partnering with climbing roses is a classic way to use this clematis, but it works equally well sprawling through a shrub that blooms earlier or later in the season and doesn't add much to the planting in midsummer. As a final bonus, 'Prince Charles' is in pruning group three, so aftercare couldn't be simpler. All you have to do is chop the growth back to about 15in above the ground before it comes into life each spring.

Dahlia 'Karma Fuchsiana' We tend to think of dahlias as late-summer blooms, and indeed they are. But the first of them open in early July and, with rigorous deadheading, they continue to produce flowers until the frosts. This variety has almost luminous pinkish coral flowers, so if you crave bold colour during July and August, dotting a few of them through the border will do the trick. They also make excellent cut flowers, so you can bring some of that colour inside, too.

Erigeron karvinskianus Forgive me for recommending something I've most definitely plugged before, but it bears repeating that this low-growing perennial will be smothered in dainty white daisies, tinged with pink, for several months from late spring. Use it to fill gaps at the front of a border or allow it to sprawl over the sides of containers, soften steps and seed into the gaps between paving stones.

Fuchsia magellanica var gracilis 'Versicolor' This species fuchsia will bear its delicate, slender ballerina flowers through the summer and well into autumn. The shrub's silvery leaves, pink-tinged when young and edged with cream, are equally attractive in their own right. This is one of the hardy forms – though happiest in sheltered, well-drained situations – bringing the feel of warmer climes without the hassle of having to provide additional winter protection.

Gaura lindheimeri 'Siskiyou Pink' The range of gauras available at garden centres seems to expand every year. All are good-value, drought-tolerant sun-lovers, producing flowers in shades of pink or white, with green or wine-coloured stems and foliage. This form will produce its butterfly-like flowers from

May to September, by which time the leaves will be flushed with autumnal colour.

Penstemon 'Pensham Plum Jerkum' Reliably perennial, penstemons are invaluable midsummer performers, adding colour to the border when neighbouring plants may be having a quiet moment. This variety has deep maroon tubular flowers dangling from 30in stems, with subtle white veining inside the throat. The foliage is a bright apple green, which adds value and interest.

Perovskia 'Blue Spire' Cool blue tones are particularly welcome in the latter part of summer, when warm shades of orange, scarlet and gold are most prevalent. Perovskia is a deciduous subshrub with branching stems, small grey leaves and a generous sprinkling of tiny, dusky blueish mauve flowers that last into autumn. Choose a sunny spot with well-drained soil for the best results.

Verbena 'Claret' While at my local garden centre, I scooped up an armful of these low-growing verbenas, which bear clusters of small, deep ruby flowers on slender stems. According to the label, they're hardy, but I think they might struggle to overwinter successfully in cold, damp gardens. I'll know next year how they fare in mine. Either way, I'm happy with my purchases, which are filling gaps of brown earth in front of the sunny south-facing border.

Veronicastrum virginicum 'Lavendelturm'

I fell for veronicastrums while filming at the Royal Horticultural Society garden at Wisley, in Surrey. Tall, sturdy stems are ringed with whorls of foliage at regular intervals along their length. Like a deconstructed Elizabethan ruff, these are topped with upward-pointing bottlebrush flowers in shades of pink, white and, in the case of this variety, a dusky blueish mauve, which lifts most colour schemes. Flowering continues for several weeks, with the whole plant humming with butterflies and bees. As a bonus, the seedheads make an attractive architectural contribution well into autumn, months after the flowers have faded.

FURTHER READING

365 Days of Colour in Your Garden by Nick Bailey, £37.50, easons.com

My garden is a real damp squib." Over the past few weeks, this has been a common complaint among my friends. One might assume it is simply a reference to the rain-soaked result of sloshing about in what turned out to be a seriously wet start to the summer. In fact, most plants rather relished having a regular drink, interspersed with short bursts of sun and periods of relative warmth. Despite the recent heatwave, roses are blowy and lawns are lush and green.

No, their disappointment is more to do with the mid- to late-summer gap in flowering that seems to affect so many gardens every year, in all weathers. By July, the fresh exuberance and beauty of that first flush of bulbs and perennials has been consigned to memory.

Equally, the glorious riot of colour heralded by late summer and continuing into autumn is still to come. The russet tones of rudbeckias, heleniums and other late-summer flowers provide a second high point in many gardens. So what of the bit in the middle? Will it be the icing that sandwiches two layers of cake, or simply a lull between courses?

The answer lies in the amount of housing that becomes obsolete each year. Obsolete means the house is no longer fit for purpose as a dwelling. A vacant dwelling, which may be a perfectly habitable house, is merely unoccupied. From 2011 to 2016, 31,970 houses became obsolete in Ireland. That's an average of 6,394 houses per annum, or 123 each week.

There are always obsolescence rates in housing, and international

norms would suggest that they are usually about half a percent of the total housing stock per annum. As a result of our relatively new housing stock, Ireland's rate has been slightly less, with the numbers of obsolescent houses varying over the past 15 years, from just under 6,500 per annum to nearly 8,000.

This is all very well until we start to look at the rate of obsolescence in relation to the numbers of houses that are being

built. In the 2006 census, for every 100 houses we built, we lost about eight through obsolescence. In 2011, this number had risen to nearly 15. In the 2016 census, for every 100 houses that were completed, we lost almost 63 houses to obsolescence. No wonder we're nearly at housing standstill.

There are several reasons why houses become obsolete, some more acceptable than others: neglect (occasionally strategic), fecklessness (can't be bothered), financial constraints (can't afford to rehabilitate the building), lack of financial constraints (no monetary imperative), regulation changes, family disputes, lack of awareness (especially if owned from overseas). All of these factors, and doubtless many others, play a role in allowing housing to become obsolete.

The increasing significance of obsolescence in a period of almost zero housing output points to the need not just to increase our housing supply, but also, importantly, to better



The housing standstill can be arrested if fewer houses fall into disrepair

manage the supply we have. This will probably involve, in some way, challenging ownership, as I wrote last week.

An initial issue here will be finding out who owns many of the properties. When confronted with an empty house, census enumerators have to knock on

neighbouring doors to uncover the status of the house.

We would benefit from a state register of beneficial ownership – the word "beneficial" is important here, so that we have an actual name, rather than a company registered as the owner.

There is one other curiosity

with the way we count our houses in Ireland. Adding a house to our national tally is done by counting when a residence is newly connected to the ESB supply, but there are several reasons why a house that is not new may be connected to the grid. These include a ghost estate coming back into use, a temporary connection while works are being carried out, or the conversion of a garage to a granny flat. The margin of error is about 20%.

If we apply this to our census housing completions of 50,951 from 2011 to 2016, this brings the total down to nearly 41,000. Official figures show that in 2015, 12,666 houses were completed. If we factor in the ESB component, we're now down to 10,132 houses. Subtract annual obsolescence, and we're now at just 3,738 houses being added to our housing stock in 2015.

It seems we have more information on our livestock in Ireland than we do on our housing stock. Housing policy deserves a better evidential basis.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

