

# Colour themes

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Many beautiful gardens and public landscape plantings have owe their success primarily to restricting the colours of flowers, fruits, stems and foliage within a limited, related range. This is sometimes known as colour themes.

Some of the first examples of colour theme borders, especially of white flowers and grey and silvery foliage, were created in the Arts and Crafts, 'English country gardens' of the early twentieth century. Some of these are nicely preserved or have be recreated such as Hidcote Bartrim Manor in Gloucestershire, Hestercombe House in Somerset and, perhaps most famously, at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent. The careful control of colours in these borders creates a pervasive mood and subtleties of tone, tint and intensity can be appreciated that might be lost in a more diverse colour scheme. At Hidcote for example, we can appreciate the amazing diversity of colour even amongst whites, creams, greys and silvers. The contrast with the red borders in the same garden is extreme. These are sultry, sub-tropical extravagance, where the intense, rich reds of hardy and tender flowers melt into the bronzes and purples of foliage and the whole effect is strangely unfamiliar in the subdued, hazy light of Britain.



Sissinghurst White garden – not only explores the range of palest shades, but also brings out the quality of greens



The red borders at Hidcote revel in warm late summer light

Other single colour themes have also been used to wonderful effect, and it is interesting that different colour themes may be suited to different locations and conditions: yellows bring vitality in the shade of buildings and many yellow flower and foliage plants prefer the low light of such locations. Most blue flowered and silver or grey foliated plants, on the other hand, need full sun and warm conditions to grow well and develop their most effective foliage colours. This is because the grey or silver leaf colour that arises from a woolly or 'tomentose' leaf surface is usually an adaptation to moisture stress or intense sunlight in the plant's natural habitat.

On single colour themes, painter and most famous of planting designers. Gertrude Jekyll, was cautious:

"It is a curious thing that people will sometimes spoil some garden project for the sake of a word. For instance, a blue garden, for the beauty's sake, may be hungering for a group of white lilies, or for something of palest lemon-yellow, but it is not allowed to have it because it is called the blue garden, and there must be no flowers but blue flowers. I can see no sense in this; it seems to me like fetters foolishly self-imposed. Surely the business of the blue garden is to be beautiful as well as blue. My own idea is that it should be beautiful first, and then just as blue as may be consistent with its best possible beauty. Moreover any experienced colourist knows that the blues will be more telling - more purely blue - by the juxtaposition of rightly placed complementary colour". (Jekyll, 1908)



The complementary colours in the orange flowers and grey bluish foliage of *Strelitzia parviflora* make the

and experience.

Colour composition can be based on value (that is, darkness or lightness) and intensity (richness of colour) rather than just on hue – pastel flower colours and grey foliage are given unity by the grey or white that is found in all the pastel hues. Pale pinks and pale purple blues are a particularly effective pastel colour scheme. 'Pastel' here means simply low intensity of colour that is diluted with white. By contrast, a richly coloured scheme would create character of tropical intensity and would work well in the clear bright light of the Pacific. *Hibiscus*, *Bougainvillea*, *Tibouchina*, *Clivia* and *Canna* all look their best and belong together in the brilliant light and strong shadows of New Zealand summer day.

Some colour combinations have had a bad press, unfairly so in my view. Pink and orange often thought to clash, but this is because of lighting qualities and cultural preferences. In countries like India, these two colours are traditionally brought together in fabric and other art



The gravel garden at Elmstead Market, Essex, by Beth Chatto

Yellow and orange is emphasized by occasional touches of blue and purple

Well balanced, dual colour themes can also unify a planting scheme. The contrast and enhancement of complementary colours is most powerful when each hue is restricted to a narrow range. Yellows and purples make vibrant complements of colour, and also contrast of light and dark, because yellows are lighter and fresher than purples of similar intensity. Blue and orange may be less successful as a complementary pair, because the contrast in value is less, both colours can appear rather heavy in the presence of their complement. It is hard to say why this is so, it is a matter of perception

and craft, so why not in planting? (- think of the bi-colour *Bougainvillea* varieties such as 'Hawaiian Orange' that fade superbly from orange to pink)



Colourful bracts of *Bougainvillea* 'Hawaiian Orange' fade from orange to pink)

The success of the restricted colour themes like white gardens and so on is partly thanks to the variety and emphasis that the foliage add to the scheme. This is strongest for a red colour theme in which the red flower hues are complemented by the foliage greens, but in other colour themes as well there will still be enough variety in the foliage to liven up the composition as a whole. It is particularly good to include a proportion of dark green foliage that will anchor the pale and pastel colours and also to absorb and foil intense flower colours.



Rich red foliage of *Cordyline* 'Red Fountain' harmonises with bronzy tints of the *Carpodetus serratus*, prostrate form but the green in the foliage also provides complement in this richly coloured foliage scheme at Auckland Botanical Gardens, Manurewa .