

1. *Peucedanum verticillare*2. *Astrantia maxima*

## A fresh look at COTTAGE GARDEN PLANTS

You want planting as charming as your granny's cottage garden – just not so... well, old-fashioned. Award-winning designer Jane Brockbank explains how to make a cottage garden with a bright, new feel

**T**raditionally the English cottage garden overflowed with a mix of herbs, fruit, vegetables and flowers. No formal blocks of perennials, no great prairie-style swathes. It was all a bit of a jumble and therein lay its charm.

Its appeal endures in part because we like this apparent lack of control. It feels less demanding – comfortable even – partly because it is so unashamedly romantic and pretty. The tall spires of foxgloves and hollyhocks, columbines, poppies and daisies speak to us of the British countryside; they bring to mind

our summer-flowering verges, spring woodlands and that rarest of things, the wildflower meadow.

The question is, how do we keep this spirit of the cottage garden, with all its rural connections and romantic ideals, but update and adapt it to our contemporary tastes and needs, even if all we have is a small town garden? How do we create the impression of abundance without giving ourselves impossibly high maintenance regimes? We have also become acutely aware of the important role our gardens have to play in supporting wildlife. Our

choice of plants – and how we manage them – ought to reflect this.

Most of the answer lies with plant selection. A modern cottage-style garden would not rely quite so heavily on the shrubs (particularly roses), be a little more dramatic with the perennials (even in a small space) and keep a mix of edible and ornamental – but stay away from anything that needed endless spraying, dead-heading, feeding or staking. I would also recommend, in general, keeping to plants that look like they haven't strayed too far from their country cousins. ▸

IMAGE: FLORENCE/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; 3: ISTOCK/PHOTOS

3. *Digitalis x mertonensis*

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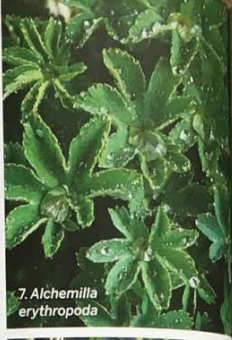
4. *Molinia caerulea*  
'Transparent'



5. *Thalictrum flavum*  
subsp. *glaucum*



6. *Rosa x odorata*  
'Mutabilis'



7. *Alchemilla*  
*erythropoda*



8. *Cavolo nero*

## 15 plants to update your cottage garden

**1. *Peucedanum verticillare*** (Pictured on page 48.) This giant umbellifer will add an *Alice in Wonderland* quality to your garden. Flat, creamy flowers grow on strong branching stems in June and July. Best of all is its stately skeleton, standing well into winter. Grow in a sunny spot and under-plant with billowy *Campanula lactiflora*. It's short-lived but will seed itself around in lighter soils. Expect a height of up to 2.5m and spread of 1.25m.

**2. *Astrantia maxima*** (Pictured on page 48.) Masterworts are much loved in the cottage garden and this species has to be the most charming of all. Its refined flowers sit beautifully with annual poppies and lime-green *Alchemilla mollis*. It needs a bit of moisture – like all masterworts – and lasts well, given a little dappled shade beneath a canopy of trees or shrubs. Up to 50cm tall.

**3. *Digitalis x mertonensis*** (Pictured on previous page.) A cottage garden without foxgloves is unthinkable. This hybrid is particularly worthy as it's more reliably

perennial than others. Tall, densely packed spires of tubular flowers the colour of crushed strawberries hover above low mounds of dark green foliage in May and June. Plant in drifts through borders in sunny or semi-shaded places, with *Aquilegia vulgaris* var. *stellata* 'Ruby Port' and groups of ferns. 90cm tall.

**4. *Molinia caerulea* 'Transparent'** Moor grasses are wonderfully unfussy. They tolerate poor soil, will grow in sun or shade and add fine definition to group plantings. Their flower heads rise in late June from clumps of strap-like leaves, and carry on growing until they reach a lofty 2m. Their shimmering, fine flower panicles are almost transparent. Repeat through borders and partner with Chinese meadow rue, *Thalictrum delavayi*.

**5. *Thalictrum flavum* subsp. *glaucum*** Tidy gardeners might turn their noses up at this slightly badly behaved meadow rue. In lighter soils it is a prolific self-seeder, but in the cottage garden that can be a bonus – unexpected combinations are welcome. Early glaucous foliage gives rise to tall, willow stems topped with pouffes of acid-yellow flowers in June to July. It looks stunning

behind red-flowered shrub roses. In good soils it can reach 1.8m, but in leaner soils much less. Plant in sun or light shade. Bees adore it.

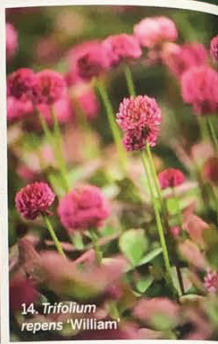
**6. *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis'** Roses have been the mainstay of the cottage garden but any included now need to earn their keep. This shrub rose has a light and open shape. Flowers start out honey-yellow and gradually change to pink and deep rose. Blooms appear in June and don't stop until the first frosts. It may reach a height of 1.8m but is usually around 1.2m. It's best in sun.

**7. *Alchemilla erythropoda*** This dwarf form of the popular and versatile lady's mantle makes an interesting change. Used as repeated edging it forms a neater, finer texture than the more usual *Alchemilla mollis*. Another self-seeder, it will find its way into any available cracks in the paving (a good thing). It's not fussy about conditions; plant in sun or shade. 15-20cm tall, 15cm wide.

**8. *Cavolo nero*** Italian black kale is a leafy cabbage that not only tastes delicious but looks elegant. Its dark leaves resemble palm fronds up to 1m long. ▷



9. *x Alcaithaea*  
*suffrutescens* 'Parkallee'

10. *Papaver atlanticum*11. *Ageratina altissima* 'Chocolate'12. *Selinum wallichianum*13. *Salvia lavandulifolia*14. *Trifolium repens* 'William'

▷ Sow seed in a sunny spot towards the front of a border and use as a foil for softer, fluffier edging plants such as *Gypsophila 'Rosenschleier'* or *Erigeron karvinskianus*.

**9. x *Alcalthaea suffrutescens* 'Parkallee'**  
(Pictured on previous page). This dramatic, voluminous hollyhock is a sub-shrub, coming back year after year. It's less prone to rust than the more common *Alcea rosea*, and needs plenty of space to develop its open, vase shape. Masses of flowers with a central frill (and occasionally dark basal blotches) cover its tall, branching stems. It needs an open, sunny spot. Height 2m, spread 1.25m.

**10. *Papaver atlanticum***  
The Atlas poppy from Morocco is a perennial with basal rosettes of bluish leaves and pale orange flowers on thin wiry stems. It's similar to that old cottage garden favourite the Spanish poppy, *Papaver rupifragum*, but paler and even prettier. Sadly it is a morning-only poppy, but that's forgivable as it flowers from May to September and somehow goes with everything. Allow it to self-seed – you can never have too many. It's best in the sun, and grows to a height of 60cm.

**11. *Ageratina altissima* 'Chocolate'**  
An exceptionally useful perennial. Early dark-pewter foliage adds depth and drama, and late, flat heads of buff-coloured flowers bloom at a time when most flowers have long given up the ghost. It thrives almost anywhere except in deep shade or very dry soils. Flowers July-September. Height 1m, spread 50cm.

**12. *Selinum wallichianum***  
Essentially a posh, chunky cow parsley, this perennial umbellifer will, usefully, grow in light shade or full sun. In May it makes hummocks of finely cut emerald-green foliage, followed by large, billowing umbels of white flowers. In good, deep soil it lasts well, from July to September. Plant in groups for dramatic effect, allowing plenty of room. It spreads to 80cm and reaches a height of up to 1.8m.

**13. *Salvia lavandulifolia***  
The lavender-leaved sage makes a taller, more compact shrub than common sage (*Salvia officinalis*). The narrow leaves are a pale grey-green; striking bright-blue flowers bloom abundantly on tall spikes. It makes a wonderful punctuation point and is perfect for a corner or up against the house on a

south-facing wall. Like all sages it needs full sun and dislikes winter wet. It grows up to 70cm tall with a spread of 60cm.

**14. *Trifolium repens* 'William'**  
Beware – this vigorous clover adds a touch of the wild. It's worth the risk, though, for its deep-bronze foliage and deep-pink flowers from May to August. It attracts bees and looks lovely when allowed to run along cracks in paving. Plant next to other vigorous edging plants such as silvery *Artemisia ludoviciana* 'Valerie Finnis'. It will tolerate drought and is happiest in sunshine. 30cm high.

**15. *Knautia macedonica* 'Melton Pastels'**  
A sturdy and unusual scabious that has that most prized attribute: it blooms all summer. Flowers range from a soft, pale pink to deep claret, giving it a multi-toned look, like annual poppies. Flowers rise to 90cm above basal rosettes of mid-green leaves. Plant behind chunky sedums or mix in with some salad crops in a sunny spot. It's a good nectar-provider, so will attract butterflies and bees. ◻

For more ideas about cottage garden planting see [www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/design/plant\\_recipes/cottage\\_garden.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/design/plant_recipes/cottage_garden.shtml)

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