



# "Don't let the colour wheel boss you about"



Colour fashions will come and go, says Alex Mitchell. So just plant your favourites



● **Alex Mitchell** trained at Chelsea Physic Garden, writes for the Evening Standard and is author of four books including *Crops in Tight Spots*

○scar Wilde once wrote: "I don't like principles. I prefer prejudices." When it comes to colour in the garden, who isn't guilty as charged? I used to literally shudder at yellow. Salmon-pink brought me out in hives. As for variegation, this has been enough to send people to their beds.

I used to be so scared of accidentally planting something in a garish colour that, for years, I only bought flowers in white. Or those that had the decency not to flower at all. This the equivalent of buying posh metal garden furniture that hurts your bum as opposed to cushions on bouncy plastic loungers that you can actually fall asleep in after lunch.

If someone came round to my house bearing a plant gift, my only question was, what colour are the flowers?

Anything considered brash, yellow or the wrong shade of pink, and my only thought would be how to avoid them ever visiting again so I could put it on the compost heap and forget the unfortunate event ever happened.

With passions running this high, it's no wonder we often stick to the inoffensive so we can't upset anyone or commit a terrible social faux pas. The looming presence of something called 'the colour wheel' doesn't

help: a design chart showing what colours should go next to each other that anxious gardeners pore over to avoid social Armageddon. I can report that I have stared at one of these bossy circles for hours and concluded it's best used as a drinks coaster.

It's about snobbishness really. We might think we're independent but we're just followers of fashion and the product of our past experiences. White makes me feel like Vita Sackville-West, which is always a good thing, though I'd struggle with her breeches. Warm orange makes me feel Californian, like I'm wandering barefoot out to my orange tree with a guitar, like Joni Mitchell. But mauve? Mauve makes me think of boxes of

Kleenex tissues in the back of Ford Mondeos.

This is unfair to violas, asters, rhododendrons, azaleas and crocuses, and possibly Ford Mondeos, but when you've once mistaken a carpet of crocuses in Greenwich Park for flytipping, you can never unsee it.

It's risky to plant your garden up to the latest fashion colours anyway, because you

can't keep up. By the time the flowers have emerged, they'll be out of fashion again. For a time, everything was white, green or pastel. We're currently emerging from a phase when flowers looked like they were subtly dying in shades of ochre or brown. These flowers were termed copper or 'café au lait' (much better names than 'leaf litter' or 'gone-off ham', which describe them just as well).

But now, it seems, any colour goes; the brasher and bolder the better. If last year's Chelsea was all about purples, blue and orange, this year's hues are even brighter. It's officially impossible to plant a garish dahlia. As for Living Coral, this year's Pantone shade of the year, even plant sales in this colour are up. Who would have thought that we'd be actively trying to fill our gardens with flowers exactly the same shade as the Potus?

Now I'm getting older I couldn't care less about fashion. I can't wait for my in-your-face yellow tree peony flowers to open and for my baby doll pink begonia to bloom. I've even made my peace with mauve. Just plant what you feel like. If you're worried, call it kitsch. Now where are my orange chrysanthemums? 🌻



*Mauve makes me think of boxes of Kleenex tissues in the back of Ford Mondeos*



If you're not sure, call it Kitsch

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