

Screen Stars

Use plants that have open, see-through flowers and stems as scrims and screens to bring drama to the garden.

BY JANET DAVIS

BYOND THE basics of designing a border with appropriate plants chosen for their color, height and shape, there is another more ethereal quality common to a small roster of plants that makes them ideal for adding movement, light, and a sense of enigma to a planting scheme. These are the “see-through” or “scrim” plants. In theater parlance, a scrim is a gauzy, transparent curtain that allows the audience to see through it to a scene being played out in the background. In garden design, such plants fulfill their own roles while encouraging viewers to look through them to other plants or distant corners of the garden. They can also be used as seasonal exclamation points and to partially screen views—around a patio or pool, for instance—without obscuring the view completely.

The best see-through plants feature tall, wiry stems topped by small or very airy, loose flowers or inflorescences that sway easily in the wind, in delicate contrast to their more stolid neighbors. The flowers might be slender spikes that create vertical brushstrokes against background plants, bouncing balls that lend a kinetic quality to a planting scheme, or flowers that create a hazy effect that invites a look through them, rather than around them.



Native to South Africa, wandflower or angel's fishing rod (*Dierama pulcherrimum*) is a grassy-looking perennial growing to six feet tall that bears drooping stems of pink flowers in summer.

HERBACEOUS PERENNIALS

Perennials with tall, branching stems topped with cloudlike inflorescences composed of numerous tiny flowers are excellent to use as gauzy screens.

Giant kale (*Crambe cordifolia*) with its coarse basal leaves and tiny, white flowers atop airy stems is one; lime-loving baby's breath (*Gypsophila paniculata*) with its masses of tiny, white summer flowers is another; and American native prairie spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*) topped with small, white flowers in summer to early fall is a third.



Above: *Eryngium planum* 'Blue Glitter' complements the yellow-flowering spurge (*Euphorbia* sp.) behind it. Grasses and lanky perennials—such as blazing star with tufted hair grass, top right, and gaura with Mexican feather grass, bottom right—pair beautifully to create screenlike effects.

These plants look lovely screening other perennials, of course, but really sparkle in front of dark-leaved shrubs such as deep-colored cultivars of ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*), elderberry (*Sambucus* spp.), and smoke bush (*Cotinus coggygria*).

Of the many meadow rues (*Thalictrum* spp.) with loose panicles of tiny blossoms, two of the best see-throughs are *T. rochebruneanum* and *T. delavayi* 'Hewitt's Double'. Though the latter might lean a little without staking, the effect of its small pink or white flowers twinkling in front of





The white candelabralike flowers of culver's root and orange-red flowers of Bright Eyes crocosmia provide plenty of contrasts in color, texture, and form to this shade garden.

other early-summer shade-lovers such as astilbe is magical.

For midsummer effect, try gaura (*Oenothera lindheimeri*), a native of the American Southwest beloved for the fluttery effect of its white and pink flowers held above the foliage on arching stems. Golden lace (*Patrinia scabiosifolia*) has chrome-yellow, late-summer flowerscapes that make a brilliant scrim for other late-bloomers such as summer phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), red cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), and fall-blooming New England aster (*Symphotrichum novae-angliae*) or New York aster (*S. novi-belgii*).

Many perennials feature tall, wiry stems topped with colorful, button or bottlebrush flowers that seem to dance in front of a con-

trasting foliage or floral background. Renowned Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf is fond of using burnets, such as the dark red-flowered Japanese burnet (*Sanguisorba tenuifolia* 'Purpurea') and greater burnet (*S. officinalis*) as a scrim. As he notes in his book, *Designing with Plants* (Timber Press, 2008): "Their being spaced out on stems means that it is possible to see through clusters of buttons; they are effectively transparent, in the same way that groups of narrow stems are transparent."

Perennials with a similar habit include Macedonian scabious (*Knautia macedonica*) with its burgundy-red pincushion flowers; light-purple devil's bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) for part shade; giant scabious (*Cephalaria gigantea*) with small ivory

flowers on rangy stems; and shade-loving masterwort (*Astrantia major*) with small blossoms in white, rose, and red. Then there are the spiky flowers of globe thistle (*Echinops* spp.), sea hollies (*Eryngium* spp.), and the prairie native rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*), all of which are loosely-branched, architectural perennials that tolerate dry conditions.

Three good American native see-through plants are culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), a summer bloomer that features candelabra spikes of white, pink, or lavender flowers; white-flowered foxglove penstemon (*Penstemon digitalis*); and blazing star (*Liatris* spp.) with purple spikes. And the creamy-white spires of the tall summer and fall snakeroots (*Actaea* spp.) look luminous placed in front of a dark-green hedge.

Other plants that have slender or airy spikes include rusty foxglove (*Digitalis ferruginea*) and drought-tolerant Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*, syn. *Salvia yangii*).

Seedheads can also provide a scrim effect, particularly tall, dramatic ones like those of great coneflower (*Rudbeckia maxima*).

GRASSES

Ornamental grasses with tall, wispy inflorescences can be dramatic scrim plants, responding to the smallest breeze with constant movement and swishing sound. Among the best are the tall moor grass cultivars (*Molinia caerulea* ssp. *arundinacea*) 'Skracer' and 'Transparent'—an Oudolf favorite—whose strong but slender stems and airy flowers make a delicate veil and a delightful foil to summer daisies such as false oxeye (*Heliopsis helianthoides*) and sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*).

The zingy little flowers and seeds of native switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*)

Resources

Designing with Plants by Piet Oudolf and Noel Kingsbury. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2008.

Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes by Rick Darke. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2007.

Gardentopia: Design Basics for Creating Beautiful Outdoor Spaces by Jan Johnsen. Countryman Press, Woodstock, VT, 2019.

are constantly in motion and look lovely screening New England aster or the big, bold flowers of swamp hibiscus (*Hibiscus moscheutos*). Similarly, the airy flowers of prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) make a lively, textural scrim for other prairie natives, such as pink-flowered *Echinacea purpurea* or butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*).

Many grasses with thin, silky leaves and flowers, such as tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), look transcendent when backlit by late-day sun. Other excellent see-through grasses are pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*); fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*); blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*); feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis xacutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'); giant feather grass (*Stipa gigantea*, syn. *Celtica gigantea*); and Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*).

BULBS AND ANNUALS

Bulbs and annuals can also have a see-through effect. Alliums make good screens, especially drumstick allium (*Allium sphaerocephalon*), a hardy summer-blooming bulb with spherical, crimson flowers on bobbing stems. 'Lucifer' crocosmia (*Crocosmia xcrocosmiflora*) bears numerous scarlet flowers on arching stems in early to midsummer.

DESIGN TIPS

- Since the scrim effect is a visual one intended to engage viewers, it's best achieved with tall or mid-sized plants that can be enjoyed at eye level while sitting or standing in the garden.
- Keep your combinations simple and dramatic. While it's fine to use drifts of the same scrim plant in front of drifts of more substantial plants, don't layer more than one type of see-through plant or the design will look cluttered.
- Many see-through grasses are beautiful when backlit, but for backlighting to be successful, you need to determine the track that the sun follows over your garden and situate plants in such a way that late afternoon sun shines behind them and is not blocked by obstacles such as fences or trees.



Blue oat grass forms neat clumps of blue-green foliage and produces showy pale yellow or tan flowers in late spring. In addition to its good looks, it's very cold-hardy and drought-tolerant.

Delicate lilies (*Lilium* spp.) with narrow profiles can be effective. A more unusual choice is fairy wand or angel's fishing rod (*Dierama pulcherrimum*), a native of southern Africa that has small pink,

purple, or white flowers on slender, flexible stems to six feet. Grow this plant in free-draining soil where it will receive regular water in summer. It's hardy in USDA Zones 7 to 9.



In this harmonious display, 'Red Dragon' fleecflower (*Persicaria microcephala*) peeks out amid the globular flowers of 'Purple Sensation' allium.

MORE SEE-THROUGH PLANTS

Plant Name	Height/Width (ft.)	Ornamental Characteristics	USDA Hardiness Zones
<i>Actaea simplex</i> 'Brunette' (autumn snakeroot)	3–4/2	Dark purple, fernlike foliage and tall, arching stems of purple-tinted, white flowers in fall	4–8
<i>Agastache rupestris</i> (sunset hyssop)	1½–3/1½	Aromatic leaves and spikes of orange flowers with lavender calyces in summer	5–9
<i>Artemisia lactiflora</i> (white mugwort)	5/2	Deeply-cut leaves and long-lasting, loose, white flower heads from late summer to fall	3–7
<i>Aruncus dioicus</i> (goatsbeard)	4–6/3–4	Large, fernlike leaves, loose pyramidal panicles of white flowers in early summer	3–7
<i>Chaerophyllum hirsutum</i> 'Roseum'	2/2	Tiny, soft-pink flowers in showy umbels from late spring to early summer	6–9
<i>Dasyliirion texanum</i> (sotol)	5–8/5	Long, narrow, stiff, pointed leaves emerge from crown; white flowers in summer on five-foot stalk	8–11
<i>Deschampsia cespitosa</i> (tufted hair grass)	6/4–5	Tussock-forming evergreen grass with arching panicles of silvery spikelets in summer	5–9
<i>Limonium latifolium</i> (sea lavender)	2/1½	Basal leaves with wiry, loosely branched stems of lavender-blue flowers in late summer	7–9
<i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i> (fountain grass)	2–5/2–4	Tufted grass with linear leaves and oblong panicles of green or purple spikelets in summer	6–9
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i> (prairie dropseed)	1½–2/2	Clump-forming grass with bright green leaves and drooping panicles of pale pink flowers in late summer	3–8



'Strawberry Fields' globe amaranth grows to about two feet tall and makes a good dried flower.

As for annuals, lacy-leafed umbellifers such as dill (*Anethum graveolens*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), bishop's lace (*Ammi majus*), cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'), and jewels of Opar (*Talinum paniculatum*) have sparse umbels consisting of hundreds of small florets. These plants

have the added benefit of catering to a variety of pollinators and other beneficial insects, but they also self-sow readily and can spread into natural areas in some regions, so be sure to deadhead them. The same caveat applies to tall or purpletop verbena (*Verbena bonariensis*), a tender perennial graced by

butterfly-friendly purple flowers that bloom atop tall, wiry stems in late summer.

Globe amaranths (*Gomphrena* sp.) are underused annuals that work well in designs featuring bold foliage. Among the best are magenta 'Fireworks', red 'Strawberry Fields' and 'QIS Orange'.

GETTING STARTED

The best way to perfect a planting scheme using see-through plants is to check out some of the plants mentioned here in books and at botanical gardens and take photos of good combinations you come across in your travels. (For a few design tips, see the box on opposite page.)

Above all, make sure your cast of "screen stars" performs well in your own garden. In warmer areas, for example, delphiniums can be divas, and fennel tends to self-sow aggressively in the mid-Atlantic region and in California. But once you've assigned the starring roles and directed a few performances, the scrim scenes in your garden will garner rave reviews from all who see them.

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