

# **Deriving meaning and value from plants in public urban landscapes**

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Most of our understanding of how people value plants is derived from amateur gardening

Whilst there is little “data” at the level of individual plants, that so many people “keep” plants suggests they get enjoyment from them

There are clearly mass and niche cultures within this;

Roses seem to win most national polls of favourite plants

This might simply be based on preference for flower appearance



However it seems likely that cultural constructs of what roses are, are also involved

Ceremony, nostalgia, romanticism



Many other widely valued, vernacular, “culturised” plants are affected by these factors;

Lilies, Lilacs, Magnolias, Camellias, Rhododendrons, Asters, Narcissus, Hydrangeas, Lavander, Clematis, Dahlia etc

Most of these have impressive colourful/fragrant flowers/ **nature on steroids**

Then there are niche cultures;

In some cases these are about less obvious ideas

The Alpine Garden Society would make an interesting case study:

- Small is good
- Less is more
- Obscure is very good
- Difficult to grow is very good
- knowing the provenance is good; this is an intellectual culture



There are some parallels here with the constructs associated with valuing wild plants, especially by enthusiasts and new puritans

The AGS and other niche groups represents a specific knowledge-value culture

Membership is a sieve for those who already hold certain values or wish to do so

This leads to the construction of paradigms about what makes a plant or planting “good” or less good

“Care” and “ownership” underpin perceptions of value: the opposite may be the case in nature culture

## **So what about plants in designed public landscape?**

Most of what we know of this is very generalised i.e. the Kaplans and nature

Ownership and care? interaction is largely passive, care by others can be perceived however

Scale is very different to the garden

Most plants in public planting are selected/designed by landscape architects

Another niche culture; and one highly responsive to design fashion

More interested in overall effects than individual plants

The antithesis of the AGS

Historically have valued understatement; the shock waves of modernism

patterns of branching; architectural form, leaf texture, plus functionalism



This has encouraged an aesthetic schism with the lay public

There is (at least in Sheffield) increasing interest in conspicuous displays of flowering

I have tried to encourage greater interest in “vernacular aesthetics”

+ Finding ways that this can be applied sustainably to the public landscape

There are other groups that deal with plants, who are also aesthetically distant from vernacular aesthetics

Biodiversity culture seems to be shaping up to be the most extreme of these

In this culture what plants look like appears to be unimportant

What is important is whether that plant is present on a local or NVC list

Thus far I have largely considered plant use in relation to widely held spatial norms

Plants typically organised in groups with occasional emergents



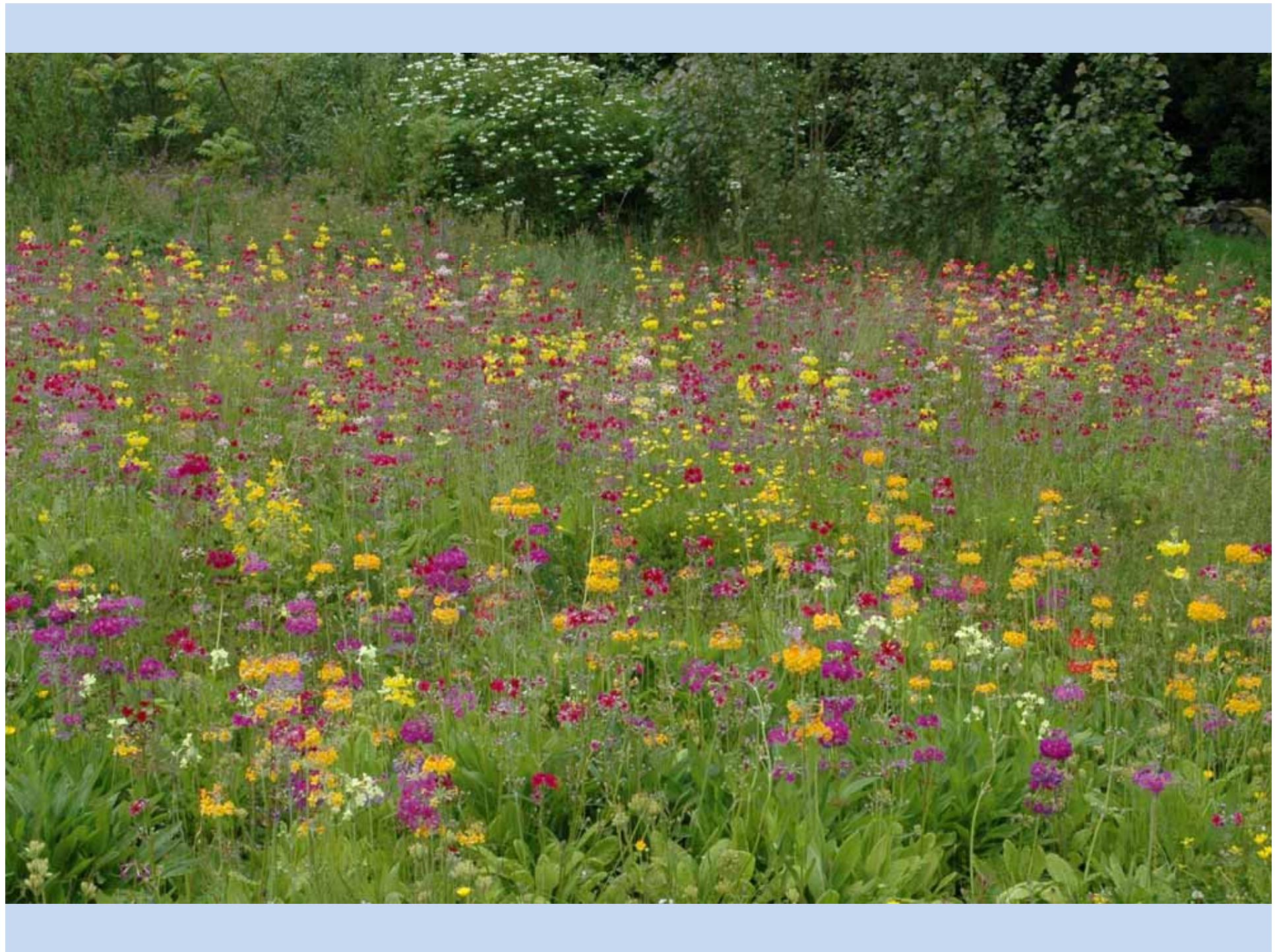
What happens when you move away from this and use plants in randomised arrangements, in which the individual plants is not particularly apparent?

There are sensible reasons to do this: but it is another potential barrier between designer/plant user and the public ?

Because most of my research is focused on this type of vegetation I have sought to understand what might drive acceptance or rejection

I had always assumed that the context of urban parks etc. ;

- Some would see the lack of obvious care as disturbing
- Likewise the lack of obvious human cultural patterns
- submerging the individual plant in the mass might be disturbing



Uncertainty as to what a planting is meant to be seems important?

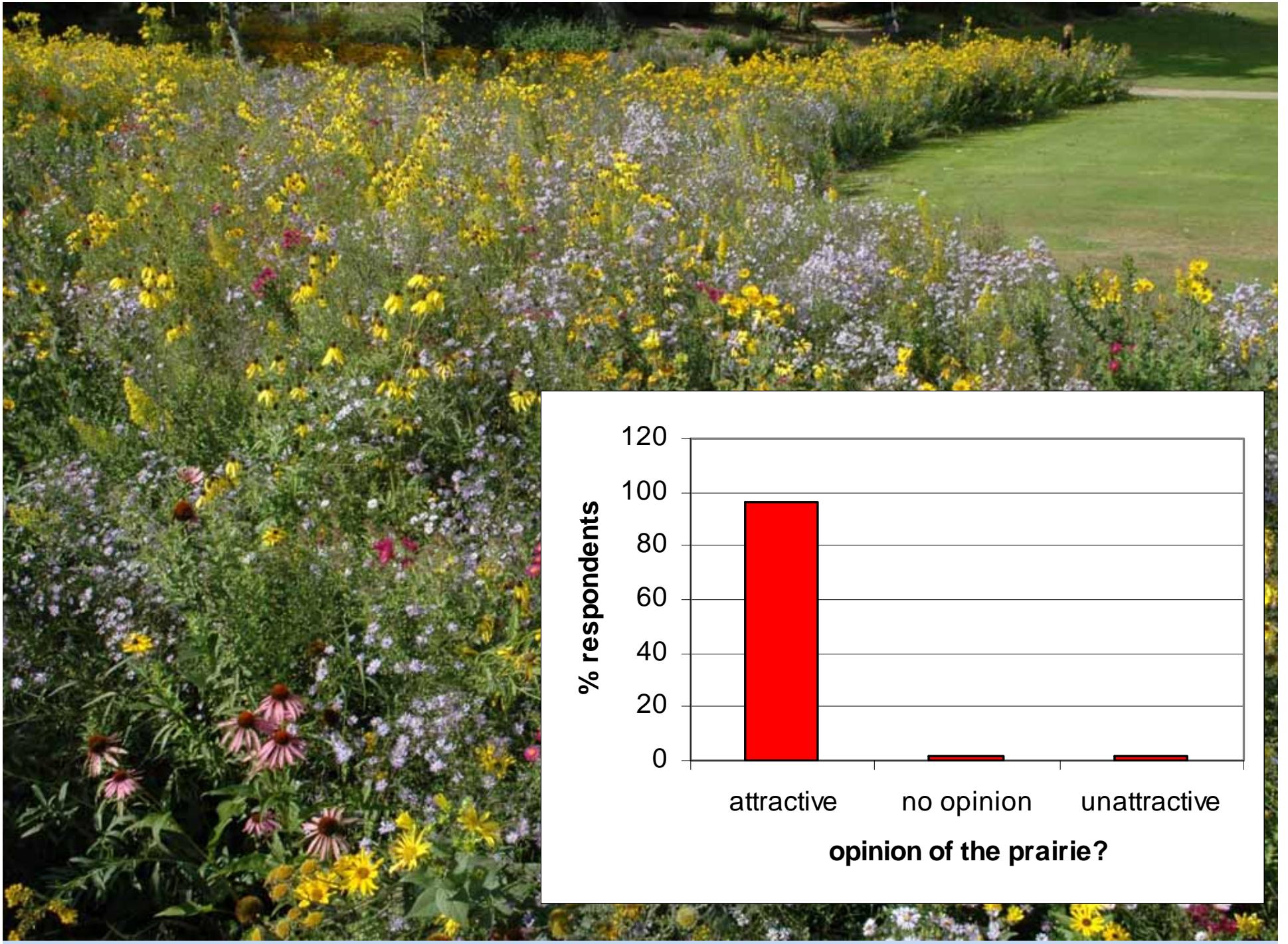
This interacts with seasonal change

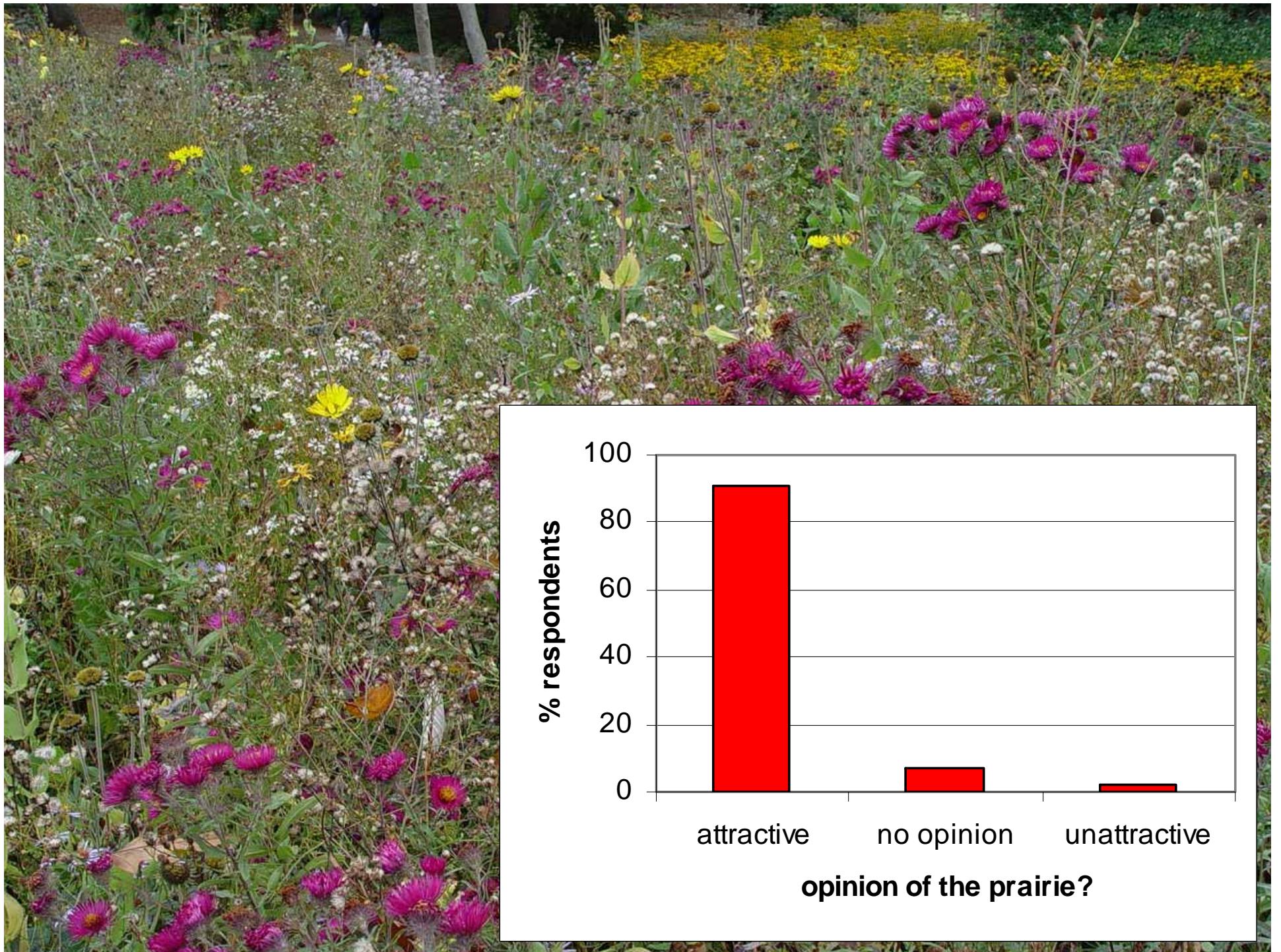
In the off season (often winter) unfamiliar people are challenged, the familiar  
Largely seem to be ok

The most compelling factor behind rejection or acceptance seems to be intensity  
of flower colour

We are almost back where we started, with vernacular preferences for roses and  
the like









If it is colourful enough for long enough

It can be strongly valued

This seems to be Irrespective of:

- Species present
- spatial arrangement and form, though these have effects

This is not necessarily the case with people in specific knowledge cultures:

Their constructed values may over-ride their intrinsic vernacular preferences

People also read their own narratives into what they are looking at, and what it means

They can see even my weird alien stuff as an affirmation of nature

## Conclusion

As a designer I think we need to see colour as much more important than we have previously done

This seems to be the bridge with the other

- Integrate a more vernacular perspective into our work
- Celebrate excess and not be cowed by leant notions of Jekyllian “good taste” nor minimalism

The parable of the angry scouser