



15 February 2010

American Society of Landscape Architects

Design Medal Nominations

c/o Carolyn Mitchell

636 Eye Street, NW

Washington, DC 20001-3736

“... A profound innovation in using plants and looking at the landscape. . . As masters of horticulture and space, Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden . . . bring revolutionary ideas to the American gardening scene that may yet earn our beautiful country the esteemed status of a gardening nation.” ~ **Dr. Marc Cathey**, President and CEO Emeritus, American Horticulture Society and former Director of the US National Arboretum

Dear Colleagues:

It is with great pleasure that we submit this awards package for your consideration for landscape architect **James van Sweden**, FASLA, AICP, for the **ASLA Design Medal**. As you will see from the enclosed submittal, few in our profession have sustained such an extraordinary high level of built work in both the public and private sectors in a period spanning nearly 35 years.

Ever since founding the firm of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in 1975 with horticulturist Wolfgang Oehme, this visionary partnership quickly became known for starting a revolution. Known simply as the *New American Garden* style, this fresh design approach was not only embraced by landscape architects, but also by horticulturists and gardeners.

In the tradition of such previous Design Medal recipients such as Lawrence Halprin (2003), M. Paul Friedberg (2004), and Laurie D. Olin (2005), James van Sweden has also published prolifically -- thus expanding the reach of his design influence. One may even suggest that van Sweden's books not only inspired the profession of landscape architecture, but literally leap over the garden wall to reach a broad populous, selling hundreds of thousands of books during his career. The results: van Sweden has been an influential tastemaker, cultivating, informing and inspiring not only successive generations of landscape architects and their clients, but also horticulturists, stewards, and garden designers.

Background

James A. van Sweden was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan. From an early age he had a love of gardening and plants. He sharpened his gardening skills and love of design in the small backyard of his family's suburban bungalow in Grand Rapids and his winters in Fort Meyers, Florida. In 1960, at the age of 25, van Sweden graduated from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Architecture degree. He went on to study landscape architecture and urban design at the University at Delft, The Netherlands. His academic and professional achievements reflect multidisciplinary skills in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. Early in his career he worked as a town planner in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and then as an urban designer and landscape architect for a distinguished firm in Washington, D.C.

Mr. van Sweden's design achievements cover a wide range of residential and nonresidential works, many of which have been honored by national awards and laudatory press.

Ever since Oehme van Sweden's 1978 design for the public gardens for patron David Lilly, at the Federal Reserve (also known as the Virginia Avenue Gardens), the firm has made a monumental impact on the Capital City. This recognition is echoed in John O. Simonds, FASLA, in his preface to *Bold Romantic Gardens* (1991). Here Simonds noted:

"Free spirited Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden are introducing an exuberant approach uniquely suited to our times and the American temperament. "In our search for better cities and a more agreeable living environment we make take a clue from the innovative approaches of Oehme van Sweden. In contemporary American garden design they are leading the way."

Following this first Federal commission, the firm has designed a diversity of public projects, the majority of which are in Washington, D.C. region. These include:

- The World War II Memorial on the National Mall, Washington, D.C.
- The Gardens of the Great Basin at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, Illinois
- North Point Park, Boston, MA
- United States Embassy, Kabul, Afghanistan
- National Association of Realtors corporate headquarters, Washington, D.C.
- Nelson A. Rockefeller Park on the banks of the Hudson River in New York City
- The International Center embassy campus, U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C.
- New American and Friendship Gardens, at the U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.
- Francis Scott Key Memorial Park in Washington's Georgetown neighborhood
- Pershing Park, new planting design for earlier, M. Paul Friedberg design, Washington, D.C.
- German American Friendship Garden, Washington, D.C.
- Olmsted Walk III at the National Zoological Park, Washington, D.C.

In addition to public work, the firm is perhaps best known for their residential designs. Ranging in scale from diminutive urban in-town gardens to sprawling suburban and rural estates, these commissions span coast-to-coast and north to south. Originally conceived in partnership with Wolfgang Oehme, most recently these designs have been collaborations with the next generation of firm principals, Sheila Brady, FASLA, Lisa DePlace, ASLA and Eric Groft, ASLA. These designs are in the hundreds, and some have received the ASLA and AIA

Honor Awards, they are too numerous to mention but should be gleaned from the numerous publications submitted in concert with this letter.

To illustrate the influence of this work consider the 1998 publication, *The New American Garden: Innovations in Residential Landscape Architecture* (Whitney Library of Design). Here, author James Trulove's comprehensive survey of 60 projects includes the work of Pamela Burton, A.E. Bye, Raymond Jungles, Dan Kiley and others. It is no accident that the title of the publication references the name given to Oehme van Sweden's approach and that the cover image is of the Woodward Garden, van Sweden's design for his Georgetown neighbor, and one of four designs by the firm in this publication.

Pioneering a New Approach

Born in America's heartland, and inspired by Jens Jensen's approach to Prairie Style landscape architecture, the New American Garden Style is a metaphor for the American meadow. It reflects the beauty of the natural landscape, in all four seasons, liberating plant materials from forced and artificial forms, allowing them to seek a natural course as they weave a tapestry across the garden plane. This style was best described in the *Visitor's Guide to the Evening Island at the Chicago Botanical Garden* (a commission with multiple projects that has been in the office for more than a decade), noting:

"The New American Garden's plants and architectural features appeal to the senses while staying true to a naturalistic aesthetic. Grasses and perennial flowers are combined in often surprising ways to form living collages of color, texture and movement."

Perhaps it was best stated in the preface to *Process Architecture 130: Wolfgang Oehme and James Van Sweden New World Landscapes* (1996) by William Johnson, FASLA, (then senior partner of Peter Walker William Johnson and Partners and former Dean and Professor at the Landscape Architecture Department of the University of Michigan) when he described the duos work as:

"A spontaneous combustion of color and form, set in motion by the slightest breeze – an Oehme van Sweden garden captivates and holds ones attention by its capacity to change in a moment or a season. . . The significance of the work of Oehme van Sweden goes far beyond good timing and popular appeal. It is grounded in the basic tenets of biological fit and how people respond to the mystery and intrigue of natural things. They have worked hard to achieve this level of expertise. Their special insight into combining design and naturalism with architecture comes from inspired learning, practiced skill, and a persistent spirit."

Books and Publications

"James van Sweden is internationally acclaimed as a landscape architect, who, with his partner Wolfgang Oehme, has evolved an entirely new concept in garden design. In the 1980s it was called the "New American" garden, but twenty years later and into the new century, not only has he shaped landscapes throughout the world but the Oehme, van Sweden "look" has fashioned the taste and opinions of a far wider audience who admire his work, read his books,

and follow his inspiration. In his contribution to both public and private garden design, from large-scale parks to intimate walled city gardens, his work has become a byword for excellence.”

Penelope Hobhouse is a writer and historian. Her books include: *Plants in Garden History*, *The Story of Gardening*, *The Cutting Garden: Growing and Arranging Garden Flowers*, *Colour in Your Garden*.

Although there are many prolific tastemakers in the gardening and horticulture world such as Michael Dirr, Rick Darke, Penelope Hobhouse, and Martha Stewart, to name a few, no other landscape architect has done so much to “cross-over” and inform and inspire a design discourse while raising the visibility of landscape architecture and the interface between design and plant materials. Since he and Wolfgang Oehme co-authored *Bold Romantic Gardens: The New World Landscapes of Oehme and van Sweden* (Acropolis Books, Ltd., 1990; reprinted by Spacemaker Press, 1998), van Sweden has written prolifically about the total design environment – from plants and nature to architecture and water. In addition to the narrative very much being in van Sweden’s voice, these publications are often illustrated with his own photographs (Roger Foley who is now a celebrated landscape photographer credits van Sweden with teaching him how to photograph gardens).

In addition to *Bold Romantic Gardens*, van Sweden’s other titles include:

- *The Arts and the Garden*; with Thomas Christopher (forthcoming from Random House, Inc.)
- *Architecture in the Garden: Fences, Walls, Terraces, Arbors Steps and More*; with Thomas Christopher, (Random House, Inc., 2002)
- *Gardening with Nature: Meadows, Outdoor Rooms, Garden Screens and Borders* (Random House, Inc., 1997 and reprinted by Grayson Publishing in 2003)
- *Gardening with Water: Fountains, Swimming Pools, Lily Ponds, and Water Edges* (Random House, 1995 and reprinted by Grayson Publishing in 2003)
- *Process Architecture 130: Wolfgang Oehme & James van Sweden: New World Landscapes*, Process Architecture Co., Ltd., Japan, 1996 (out of print).

It is worth noting that *Bold Romantic Gardens* was the recipient of two Awards of Excellence by the Garden Writers Association of America, while *Gardening with Water* was recognized by the American Horticultural Society as one of the 75 best books of the last 75 years.

Recent honors awarded to van Sweden include the Massachusetts Horticultural Society's prestigious George Robert White Medal of Honor, presented to him and Oehme in recognition of their efforts to advance interest in horticulture. He also holds the Society's Thomas Roland Gold Medal, as well as the University of Michigan's Distinguished Alumni Award and the American Horticultural Society's Landscape Design Award. His honorary memberships include the Advisory Council of the National Building Museum. Throughout his career he has lectured extensively in the United States and abroad, expanding the reach of his design philosophy and built works.

Closing

On a personal note, I have known Jim van Sweden since the early 1990s when I moved to Washington, D.C. Over the past two decades I have had the good fortune to count Jim as a friend, and in his company, to tour many of his residential designs and public projects in and around the District of Columbia and the Eastern Shore of Maryland. When it came to my attention in spring 2009 that Jim was diagnosed with Parkinson's and Lou Gehrig's disease, the Cultural Landscape Foundation moved very quickly to videotape him for our ongoing oral history series, *Pioneers of American Landscape Design*. With critical support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a number of Jim's former clients, and assistance from his successor firm, we were able to videotape Jim last summer at his home on the Eastern Shore, his office on Capitol Hill, and those celebrated projects that were ADA accessible. The three day experience was not only a Master Class in Landscape Architecture and Design, but illuminated Jim's vision, leadership and astonishing built legacy.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation's Board of Directors also recognizes that we must move swiftly so that this project can be unveiled at the ASLA Conference in Washington, D.C. this September. For all of us who have been involved, it is our hope that Jim would be able to participate in its premiere – and perhaps even more fitting would be for his professional peers and colleagues to recognize the remarkable design legacy that Jim has produced by bestowing on him this well deserved honor.

It has been my pleasure and honor to prepare this nomination. If I can be of further assistance to the committee please do not hesitate to call.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR
Founder + President, The Cultural Landscape Foundation

Enclosures/books/letters
CB/ss

1608-D Beekman Place, NW
Washington, DC 20009
Feb. 2, 2010

ASLA Board of Trustees
c/o Carolyn Mitchell, Honors and Awards Coordinator
636 I Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

Re: ASLA Design Medal Nomination

Dear Trustees:

I am writing to declare my enthusiastic support for nominating James van Sweden, FASLA for the ASLA Design Award. I have known Jim for over 35 years – even before he established the firm Oehme van Sweden and Associates. During that time, while I was working for the Professional and Design Services Offices of the National Capital Region of the National Park Service (NPS), I had the privilege of working with him on review of several projects that he designed on NPS property, such as the Federal Reserve Building grounds that incorporated one of our parks, the German-American Friendship Gardens on the Washington Monument Grounds, Pennsylvania Avenue, NW and Frances Scott Key Memorial Park.

Not only were Jim's designs a pleasure to review, because they were well-conceived in context and function, and made effective use of plant materials, but it was also a pleasure to work with him, and he readily incorporated NPS suggestions regarding adjustments to enable realistic maintenance in view of public intensity of use – a constructive collaboration. Even he calls me one of his greatest fans, since I enjoyed reviewing his plans because I always liked the designs!

In fact, Jim's first project working with NPS, the Federal Reserve Building grounds, was the one that first introduced the public to his "New American Garden" style of planting, with sweeping informal massings of perennials and shrubs that provided seasonal interest throughout the year. We received numerous requests for the name of the firm that had designed it. After this, he went on design a wide range of other significant public and private projects in DC, then expanded regionally, nationally and internationally, while always maintaining the firm's standards for quality of design and horticultural and maintenance standards.

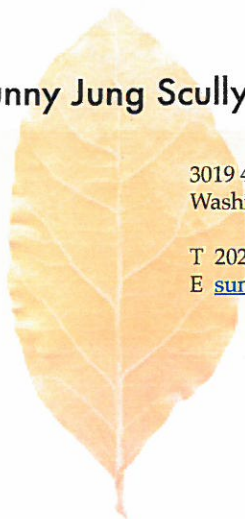
As evinced by his biographical information, Jim is also a distinguished author of several award-winning books, has lectured extensively nationally and internationally, and has won numerous awards. All in all, his body of work has not only advanced the quality of landscape architectural design, but has also publicized the profession of landscape architecture. Now it is time for ASLA to give Jim's work due recognition by awarding him the ASLA Design Medal.

It would be especially appropriate and meaningful for Jim to receive the ASLA Design Medal this year at the ASLA Annual Meeting in Washington, DC – his home base from which he launched his distinguished career that contains some of his earliest and best projects that now serve as a living legacy of his enduring excellence of design accomplishments, especially in the public realm, where they can be enjoyed and appreciated by all who visit our Nation's Capital.

Sincerely,



Darwina L. Neal, FASLA
Past President, ASLA



Sunny Jung Scully, FASLA

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Washington DC, DC 20016

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ASLA Board of Trustees

c/o Carolyn Mitchell, Honors & Awards Coordinator
636 Eye St. NW
Washington, DC 20001
Sunday, January 31, 2010

RE: James van Sweden nomination for ASLA Design Medal

Dear Trustees:

In reviewing the details required for nomination to receive the ASLA Design Medal, Washington DC's premier landscape architect, James van Sweden, comes immediately to mind. His distinguished career spans a 40 year stretch, which includes a remarkable gallery of unique and pace-setting projects. Together with partner, Wolfgang Oehme, he designed and coordinated installations ranging from magnificent private gardens, to embassies, parks, and institutional settings. Beyond setting precedents with lush signature grass and perennial usage, he educated clients to understand that places become more special through incorporation of elegant water and sculptural statements. Each project was unique and appropriate, but there was generally a consistent personal theme that stamped the work of this master.

James van Sweden has written numerous articles, books, and lectured widely- thus affecting multitudes with a fascination to emulate, and add more seasonal interest to the modern garden. His first book, "Bold Romantic Garden" was reprinted due to popular demand, and was followed by several other best sellers. Within the landscape architectural profession, one can notice his profound affect on garden design. One has only to walk around a nursery today to understand the amazing change and proliferation of plants and materials that his firm pioneered and showcased. His later books emphasized the importance of great structure as a framework for adding lush plantings. A very influential designer- van Sweden's impact on the profession of landscape architecture has made a lasting impression on all contemporary garden lovers.

As the first landscape architect hired by Oehme and van Sweden, I got a first hand look at the intense level of detail Jim brought to every project. He inspired clients to reach for something more unique- places combining sweeping gestures with remarkable intimacy. A master at the art of special placemaking- he endows us with gardens of amazing sensory delights, and generous insights into why and how we should continue to design our outdoor spaces with flair and romance.

Please consider awarding the ASLA Design Medal to James van Sweden. He's most deserving, and this fall would be an excellent time to honor such a special man in his own town.

Respectfully yours,

Sunny Jung Scully, FASLA / Principal emeritus; Lewis Scully Gionet inc.

Spacemaker Press

1250 28th Street NW
Washington, DC 20007
T 202-257-5959

February 10, 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: James van Sweden
ASLA Design Award

I am writing in support of awarding the 2010 ASLA Design Award to James van Sweden. As a book publisher, I have known and worked with Jim for over 20 years, having reissued his seminal book, "Bold Romantic Landscapes" under my Spacemaker imprint and subsequently arranging for the publication in softcover of his books "Gardening With Water" and "Gardening With Nature."

Through his books and lectures and his and his partner Wolfgang Ohme's landscapes, Jim advanced the public's understanding of the value and beauty of contemporary landscape architecture. His gardens have been featured in, I am sure, every important garden magazine published in the world. I remember him once bringing to my house (for we were next door neighbors in Georgetown for many years) copies of four major shelter magazines that had in the same month each published one of his gardens. But in fact, this was not so uncommon. Every garden editor lusted for the chance to publish the latest van Sweden garden and to be able to interview and quote Jim who always has spoken so eloquently and enthusiastically about his own work and his chosen profession.

I can think of no other landscape architect working today who so deserves this important award and the recognition it affords.

Sincerely,

James Trulove
Publisher

MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH ASSOCIATES, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

CAMBRIDGE | NEW YORK

5 February 2010

Executive Committee
Board of Trustees
American Institute of Landscape Architects
c/o Carolyn Mitchell
636 Eye St. NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: ASLA Design Medal

Dear Design Medal Selection Committee and Trustees:

I am writing to recommend, without reservation, James van Sweden for the 2010 American Society of Landscape Architect's Design Medal. Jim is the epitome of what we mean when we say someone is a designer of national significance.

A great work of landscape architecture requires many things that are elusive or nearly out of our control: a client with vision, an adequate budget, a program that fits what the site can accommodate, a contractor who cares—a perfect storm of sorts. Yet, ultimately it is the designer's responsibility to create something that transcends the predictable and the ordinary. To accomplish this requires some rare combination of vision, of genius, or personal energy and Jim has each, in spades. Design is also not quantifiable, predictable or formulaic: it requires patience, persistence, and confidence—and Jim has these qualities in abundance.

Jim has always been a person who knows how to create beautiful landscapes: he always sees opportunity for magic. Of particular note, of course, is his masterful use of vegetation, the most expressive material at the landscape architect's disposal. In Jim and his partner Wolfgang Oehme's hands, plants and planting systems become surprisingly powerful elements in the landscape of human experience. Jim's influence has left clear traces on many contemporary projects. In the Lurie Garden in Chicago and the High Line in New York City, to name just two examples, I see my colleagues building on the stirring beauty of Jim's pioneering work.

At one point in the late 1990s, Jim and I found ourselves at a reception thrown by the Chicago Botanic Garden. We had just recently been competing to redo part of the gardens—and Jim had won, of course. On a day when I was no doubt feeling a bit prickly (me? prickly?), Jim was as gracious as the day is long, going out of his way to offer me encouragement. This day, and every other time I have met him, he showed me the kind of generosity that one would hope that designers could always extend to each other, knowing as we each do that while our profession is extraordinarily rewarding, it is, at the same time, anything but easy.

So at the end of the day, James's professional generosity, his dignity, the wonderfulness of his work and the grace with which he lives his life are an important dimension of why this award is deservedly his.

Sincerely yours,



Michael Van Valkenburgh

/jg

February 10, 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

It gives me great pleasure to add my support to James van Sweden as a recipient of the American Society of Landscape Architects' Design Medal. I can't think of a more deserving recipient.

I have known Jim and admired his beautiful design work for many years. He truly advanced American landscape design when, following graduate study at the University of Delft, he founded the Washington, D.C., firm of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates.

Jim and his partner Wolfgang Oehme, introduced northern European planting design to American, and the results were astounding to all of us: Wonderful gardens, elegantly planted with combinations of plants and exotic grasses in ways we had never seen before. Their artistry was such that a whole new style was born. Modernism, due largely to its public nature, had reduced itself to an ever-more-limited palette of plants. Suddenly a new aesthetic was on the scene, rich in contrasts of color, texture, and form.

Represented in Jim's books, especially *Bold Romantic Gardens*, their new style was immediately taken up by a new generation eager to learn—and seize the opportunities of—a new vision of planting design.

Over the years Jim's firm has gone well beyond the drama of the new style, tackling important public and private commissions such as the Nelson A. Rockefeller Park in New York City, the Francis Scott Key Memorial in Georgetown, and the grand World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Jim has not only been honored as a Fellow in the ASLA but also by the world of horticulture with such awards as the Massachusetts Horticultural Society's George Robert White Medal of Honor and the American Horticultural Society's Thomas Roland Gold Medal and Landscape Design Award. He also holds the University of Michigan's Distinguished Alumni Award.

For years Jim has lectured around the world, and he has extended knowledge of the field with a number of award-winning books. All bring credit and honor to our profession.

Jim is one of the most distinguished landscape architects in the field today. He is a wonderful friend and colleague, and I recommend him to you with great enthusiasm.

Sincerely yours,

Peter Walker









































Profile

Back to Nature

Landscape architect James van Sweden has brought his unfettered, eco-friendly aesthetic to the forefront of garden design—at home and abroad

By Barbara Karth

“Jim, how’s the marriage coming?” asked Oprah. As James van Sweden tells it in his new book, *Architecture in the Garden*, his first impression of the talk show diva’s French chateau-style property in the middle of Midwestern farmland was that it was “divorced from its setting.” The landscape architect explained to his client that they needed to forge “a cross-cultural marriage” of house to land, and spent four years creating an architectural context around her home.

Not since Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of American landscape architecture, has an individual had such a singular influence on landscapes, vistas and gardening trends. James van Sweden and his partner, horticulturist Wolfgang Oehme, have placed an American stamp on gardens throughout the world. With a house in Georgetown and an office on Capitol Hill, van Sweden has amassed some of his most significant projects—including the National World War II Memorial under construction on the National Mall—in his adopted hometown.

Oehme, van Sweden & Associates’ New
(continued on page 92)

James van Sweden (above right) discusses how the arts are closely tied to garden and landscape design in his new book, Architecture in the Garden (above left).

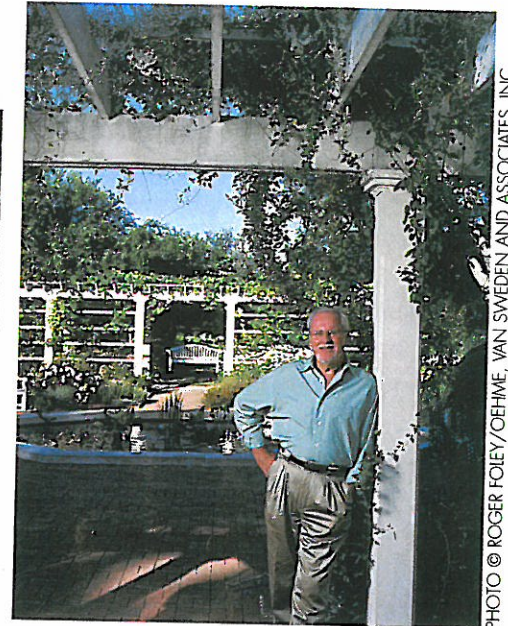
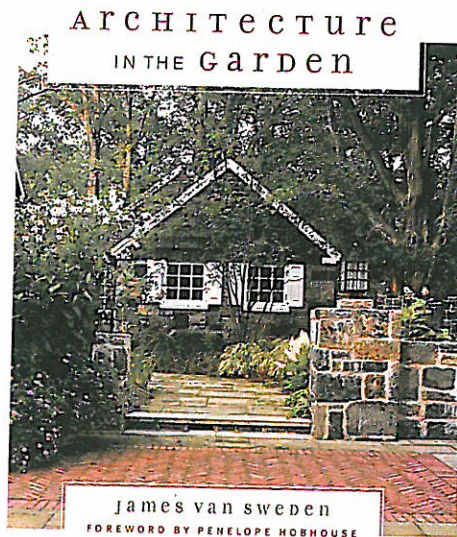


PHOTO © ROGER FOLEY/OEHME, VAN SWEDEN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.



PHOTO © HARD FEIBER/OEHME, VAN SWEDEN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.

Profile

Continued from page 88

American Garden style, which captured the attention of horticulturists and amateur gardeners alike in the '80s, stems from the metaphor that a garden is like a meadow where indigenous plants and animals peacefully coexist with human life. Their signature, relaxed style is a major departure from the forced, formal nature of traditional gardens, promoting "layered masses of foliage that celebrate the ephemeral through mystery, intrigue, and discovery." These environmentally friendly gardens typically incorporate ornamental grasses and perennials that require minimal maintenance, limited water and no pesticides. The New

American Garden also emphasizes the use of hardscape, such as carefully designed walls, terraces and steps, to complement the surrounding foliage.

Winners of the American Horticultural Society's 1992 Landscape Design Award, Oehme and van Sweden were heralded by the society for their "natural, untamed spontaneity. Gardens are planted with attention to how they will look year-round, in the sterile blandness of winter as much as in the vibrant lushness of summer. Their gardens harmonize with the natural environment."

Educated as an architect at the University of Michigan, van Sweden went
(continued on page 96)

The Chicago Botanic Garden was designed in the New American Garden style, originated by Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden. The style emphasizes informal gardens where plant, animal and human life coexist.

RICHARD FELBER/OEHME, VAN SWEDEN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.



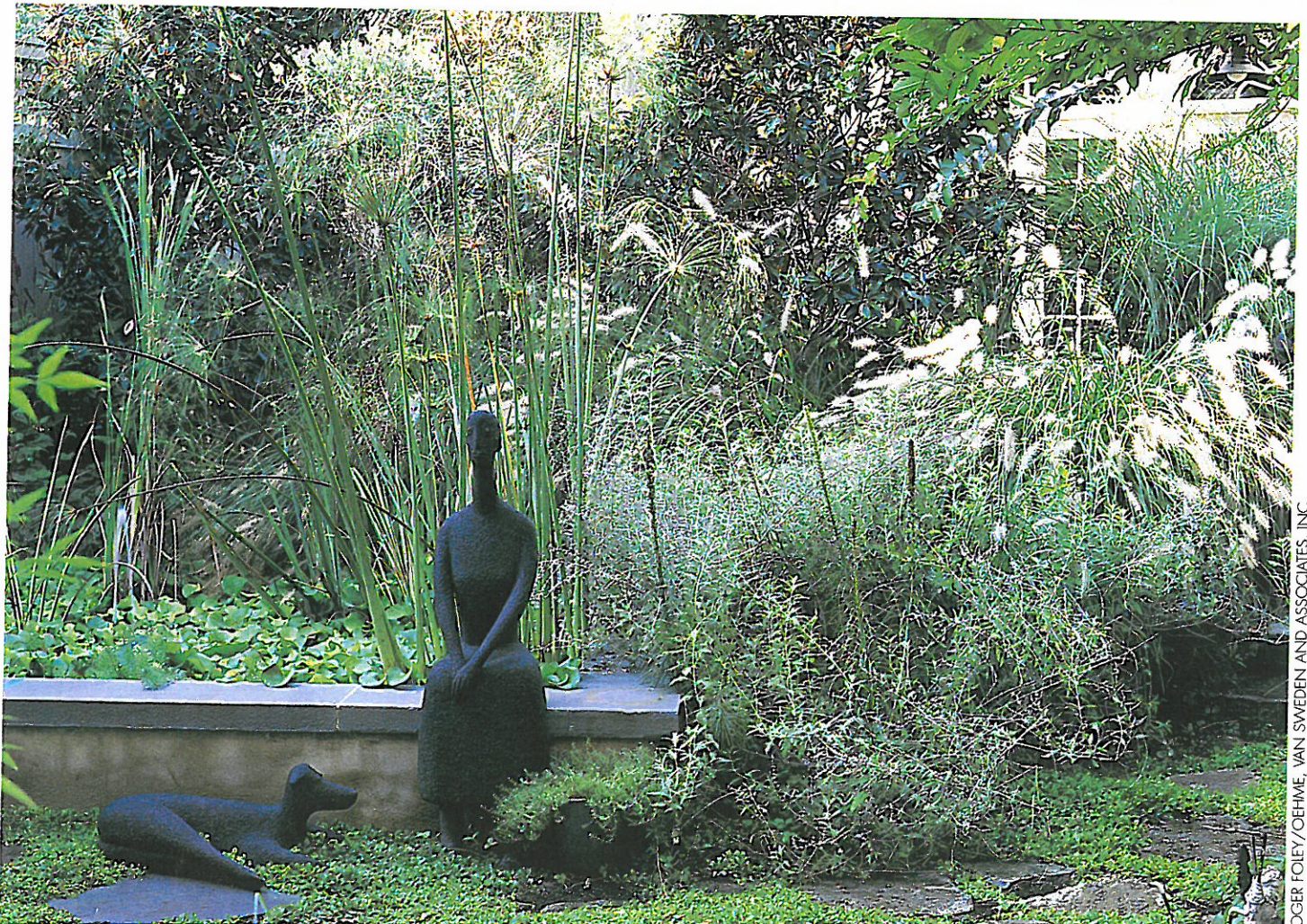
Profile

Continued from page 92

on to study landscape architecture there and at the University of Delft. A professor suggested he look up a Baltimore horticulturist, Wolfgang Oehme. "By chance in '64 I settled in Washington, and I called up Wolfgang and went to see him. That was the beginning of our friendship. I was in a city planning firm then, working as an urban designer. I became a partner in that firm, but I kept

(continued on page 100)

Van Sweden's Washington projects include the New American Garden at the National Arboretum (right). This residential town garden (below) was designed as an urban jungle, incorporating the homeowners' passion for art into the outdoors.



Profile

Continued from page 96

looking at Wolfgang working out in the field, building gardens, loading up his car with plants, and I thought, 'That's what I want to do, get outside and work and dig.'

"So in about 1971 I bought my house in Georgetown and I called up Wolfgang and said, 'Let's do this garden together.' We did that garden...the most published garden, I think, in the world." The friendship evolved into a partnership with its original offices located in a bedroom of the Georgetown home he still owns; its garden is featured in van Sweden's new book.

In *Architecture in the Garden* (Random House, New York, 2003; \$39.95), van Sweden speaks of gardens and landscaping with the vocabulary of an interior designer. Rooms create separate areas for separate functions: a kitchen garden with herbs and a spot for morning coffee, a private garden off the master bedroom, a dining area with "rugs" of brick or stone complete with borders. The outdoor rooms he discusses are furnished with sculpture, benches and tables.

The styles of his gardens vary: a Japanese-style garden in South Carolina "low country," a garden on a "wild and rocky" New York property, an estate overlooking Long Island Sound, city gardens in New York and Georgetown and his own new weekend house and garden on Maryland's Eastern Shore, to name a few.

In creating his gardens, van Sweden draws from his travels as well as from the arts. A love of art and his incorporation of ideas garnered from paintings helped him land the Chicago Botanic Garden project, which was completed last year. "I love the paintings of Helen Frankenthaler. I showed a painting of hers to the jury," he recalls. One of the panelists also happened to love the abstract expressionist's work. "She couldn't believe I was showing it in a landscape context



PHOTO © ROGER FOLEY/OEHME, VAN SWEDEN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.

thinking about writing a book on how the arts relate to landscape and garden design. "I use art in all of my books," he adds. "*Architecture in the Garden* has paintings by Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch because I am interested in the floors. It is so applicable to garden design and terraces."

Not only the visual arts, but also performing arts, inspire the architect's work. A devotee of the opera and ballet, van Sweden writes in his latest book, "Music and dance are both ephemeral, performance arts. So is gardening. Gardens, after all, are always changing, growing or dying, and you must learn to treat them as a process, an activity rather than a static work."

A second-generation American, van Sweden grew up in the 1940s and '50s in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in a Dutch Calvinist home of strong religious ties and work ethics. His father was a builder, demanding precisely executed craftsmanship. His mother ran a thriving baking and restaurant supply business that she started in her own kitchen

Van Sweden often includes hardscape elements, such as a terrace in the Frances Scott Key Park in Georgetown.

up project sites. "Those people worked hard, no sitting around," he explains, reflecting the Midwestern work ethic of the time. "They worked six days a week, and then on Sunday they went to church, and church was hard work too, just a different kind of hard work. There was a big dinner and then supper with the family and more church. There was probably about three hours a week where my mother could put her feet up and take a nap—Sunday afternoon after the dishes were done."

Evidence of this work ethic blends into his lifestyle today. In Washington, his projects appear at every turn: the Federal Reserve Building & Grounds, the New American and Friendship Garden at the National Arboretum, the National Association of Realtors, the German-American Friendship Garden on the National Mall and the parking garage at

Profile

Continued from page 100

initiatives to keep the nation's capital beautiful yet well protected.

Despite his numerous awards and achievements, van Sweden calls his collaboration on the design of the National World War II Memorial "the pinnacle of my career." Slated for completion in the spring of 2004, the memorial on the Mall will recognize World War II as the defining event of the 20th century and pay tribute to all who served and sacrificed. Two-thirds of the site will be landscaping and water, encompassing three large lawn panels, a landscaped contemplative area, waterfalls and pools.

Van Sweden is also working on a garden for the American Ambassador's residence in Paris and the American

Embassy in Afghanistan. The project in Kabul is a collaboration with his friend, Washington architect Suman Sorg. "I think in November, if everything is normal, I'll go with Suman to Kabul and visit the site for a few days and then go on to India. I want to go to India with her. She still has uncles and aunts there; she was born in Delhi. I think it would be marvelous to do that. Then I told her I would take her to Japan."

He travels the world, photographing, collecting ideas, generating new concepts and drawing inspiration. This perspective is what makes his work fresh and innovative. "I learn a lot from traveling, and I relax when I travel. I think it is very important to see other parts of the world,

historic and contemporary ways people are dealing with landscape. I have been to Japan four times, to Europe many times—I love Italy and go to England often. I am going to do a tour of English gardens, looking at walled gardens in May," he says.

James van Sweden is a man whose work, friends, daily activities and enjoyment of the arts meld. A sexagenarian, he remains open to the wealth of ideas to be gleaned from a vital, active life, one that nurtures his chosen vocation. ❖

Contributing editor Barbara Karth resides in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

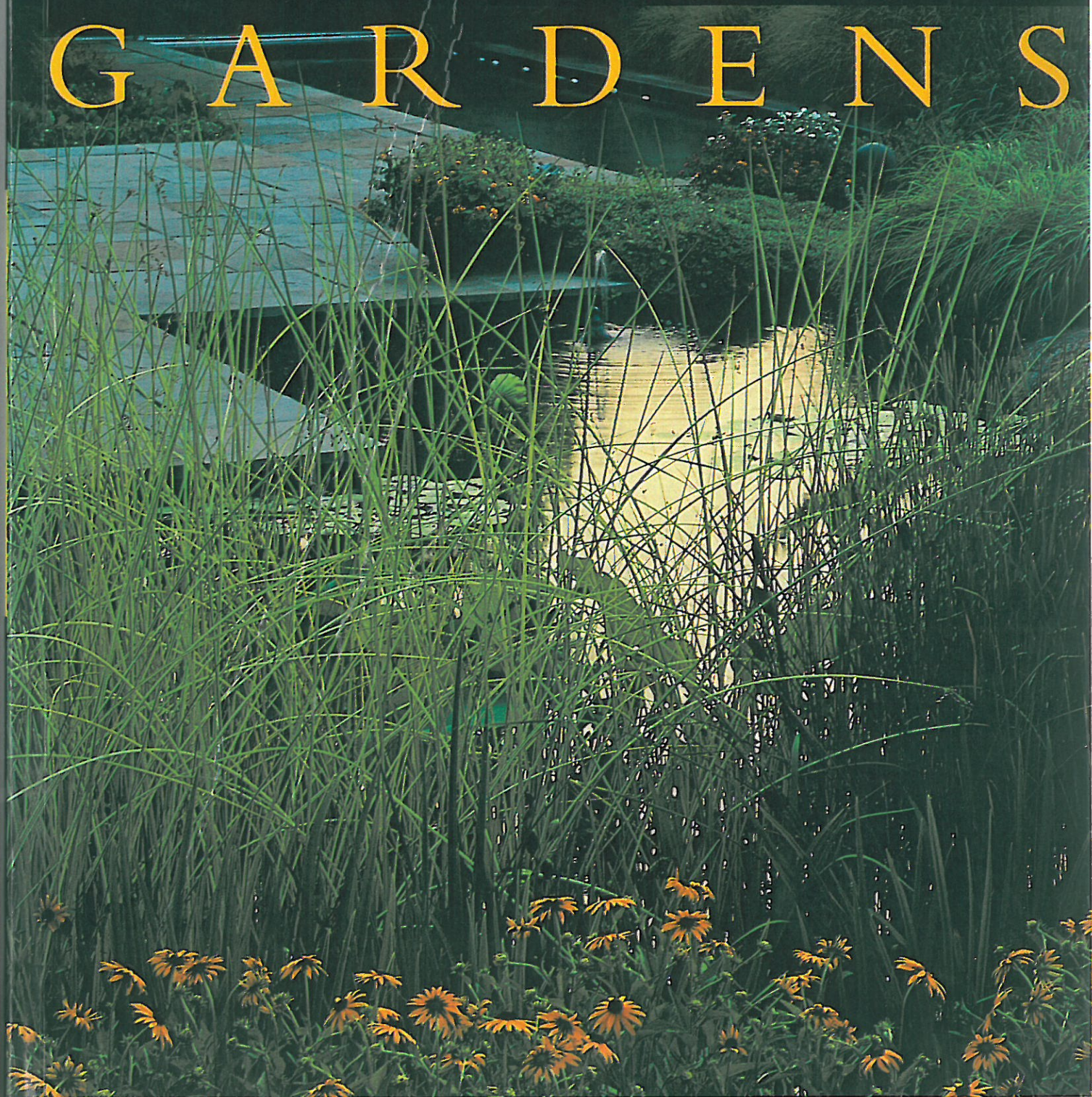
One of James van Sweden's residential projects.



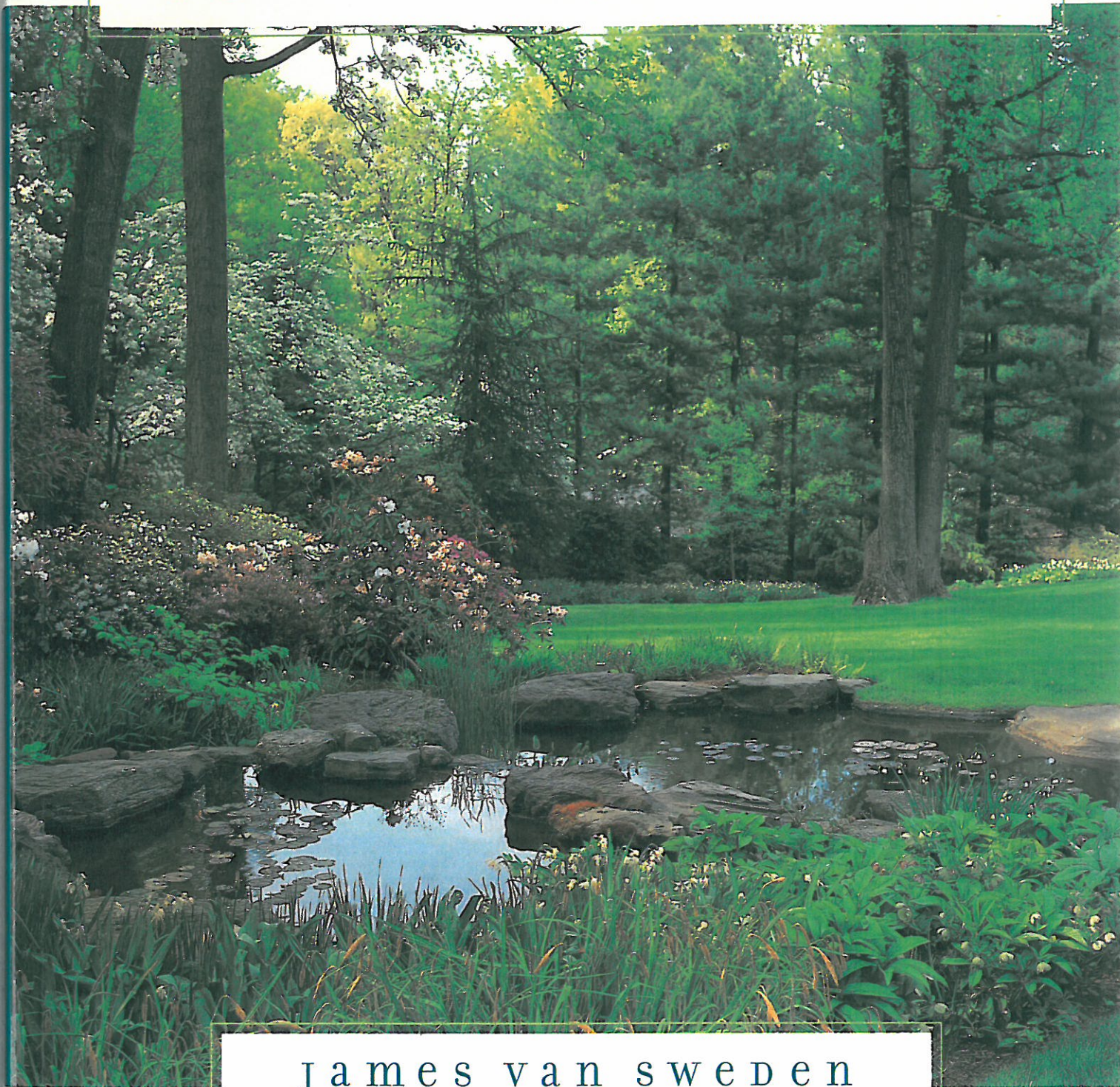
PHOTO © JAMES VAN SWEDEN/OEHME, VAN SWEDEN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.

THE NEW WORLD LANDSCAPES OF OEHME AND VAN SWEDEN
WOLFGANG OEHME JAMES VAN SWEDEN WITH SUSAN RADEMACHER

BOLD ROMANTIC GARDENS



GARDENING WITH WATER

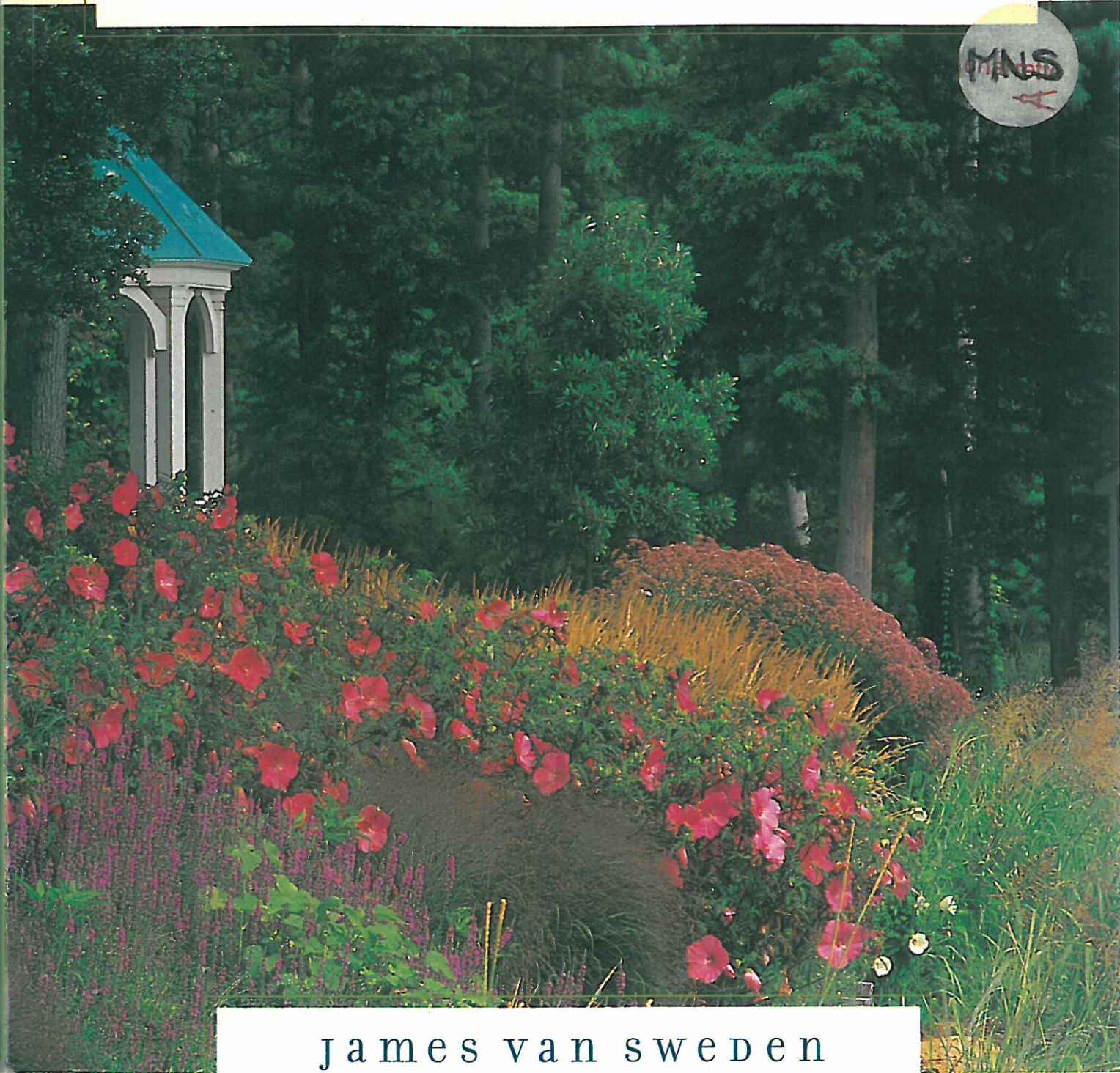


j a m e s v a n s w e d e n

Fountains, Swimming Pools, Lily Pools, Ponds, and Water Edges

GARDENING WITH nature

MNS
A



James van Sweden

Meadows, Outdoor Rooms, Garden Screens, and Borders

MNS
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ARCHITECTURE
IN THE GARDEN

JAMES VAN SWEDEN
FOREWORD BY PENELOPE HOBHOUSE



Photograph: Jerro Horvath

IN 1977 THE DIRECTOR of the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington DC decided to re-landscape the area outside the Bank's national headquarters. He called in two designers, James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme, whose partnership specialised in creating gardens that were distinctly unconventional in the USA at that time. The plan for the project involved their characteristic use of swathes of mass-planted perennials such as golden yellow-flowered *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' and billowing seedheads of grasses including *Pennisetum alopecuroides* and *Miscanthus sinensis*.

Once the job was finished staff at the bank were appalled. 'It was a totally new idea for the US,' explains James. 'The employees were looking at this and saying, "it's like a vegetable garden, it's full of weeds." They didn't like it. So we thought we would give them a lecture, with slides. We expected 40; and, do you know, 400 showed up. We were astonished. Since then they've loved it. They're even trying out the plants in their own gardens.'

The tale encapsulates what this design team has to face and illustrates many of the reasons for its success. Despite the fact that American garden history has

Stately design

In the past two decades Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden have brought a new aspect to garden design in the USA. Noel Kingsbury offers an insight into their principles and methods



Roger Foley

James (left) and Wolfgang (right) favour bold, mass plantings



featured some great names (such as Frederick Law Olmstead, Thomas Church and Beatrix Farrand) a brief drive around the average US suburb reveals a population that is apparently terrified of plant life. Surrounded by so much wilderness, it would seem that many Americans are determined that nothing remotely wild should happen in the vicinity of the home or workplace. Mowing the lawn is even enforceable by law in some localities. Wolfgang and James, however, are confident in their ideas and are never afraid of tackling their critics head-on, winning converts through their enthusiasm, candour and, above all, through the success of their work.

Revolutionary design

Having started their partnership in 1971 these two men are creating a revolution in the way Americans look at their public landscapes and in the way that they garden. They are creating a style that is distinctly American, which is gaining public acceptance and which may finally sever that last of all colonial apron strings: the dependence upon traditional English garden styles that so many keen gardeners still have. James's and Wolfgang's work is mostly inspired by

ideas emanating from Germany, Japan, Brazil and the Netherlands, but not Britain, of which James says, 'I love Beth Chatto's garden, but so many English gardens have one of everything – so you have a sort of junky appearance.'

Bold planting with perennials and ornamental grasses is the main characteristic of the partnership's work, complemented by dramatic water features and paving skilfully integrated with the plants. The public plantings and larger private gardens they have designed usually involve a limited number of species arranged in large masses, selected for their low-maintenance requirements and for their long season of interest. Their smaller private gardens use plants that many designers might reject as being too big for the space, bringing a sense of drama to the most restricted urban plot. 'Small plants only make a small space smaller,' says James. Yet despite all this boldness, there is a strong sense of the romantic too: something to do with all those big grasses, their softness both close-to and en masse, their evocation of the prairie and above all, their movement. It is this movement, this emphasis on form as much as colour, that brings life to so many of their plantings, especially in winter. >

Above left: Oehme and van Sweden gardens are best in autumn, with perennials and ornamental grasses

Above: Water is central to their work, often combined with dramatic waterside planting



Above: Wolfgang's own garden is very much a plantsman's garden: a trial ground for new cultivars as well as personal favourites

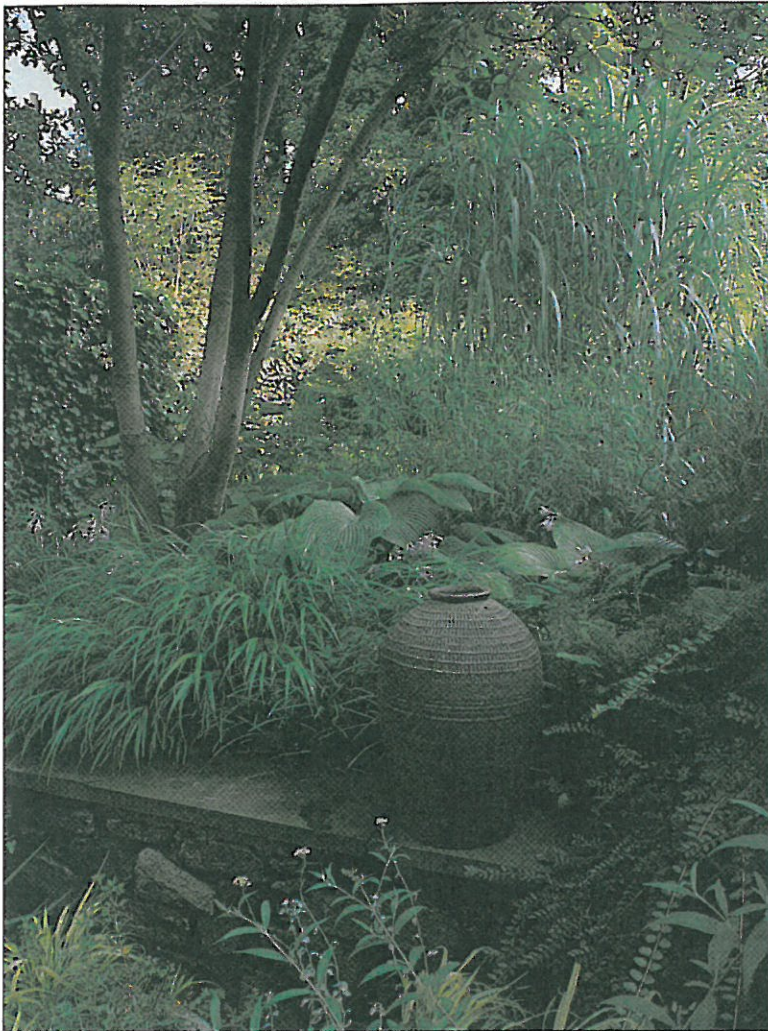
Chalk and cheese

The two men could not be more different. James seems quintessentially American, brimming with optimism and bubbly self-confidence, eyes set on the broad horizon. 'Brilliant', 'terrific' and 'wonderful' are definitely the most frequently used words in his vocabulary. Wolfgang is more subdued and intense; his vision usually focused on whatever plants are near to hand. James was born in Michigan, and developed a love of wild perennials from a childhood spent in the country. He studied architecture and after his graduation went on to study landscape architecture in the Netherlands, from where his family originates. Wolfgang was born in East Germany and studied landscape architecture in Berlin. As a young man he was strongly influenced by the ideas of Karl Foerster, generally regarded as the father of modern German naturalistic planting design.

Lawn, which has seemed to be the be-all and end-all of American gardens up to now, is used only 'when it has a specific purpose', being rejected as a feature in its own right as it is too greedy of maintenance, water and fertiliser. Shrubs are used to provide basic structure, but it is perennials and grasses that provide

the planting impact. The partnership attracts criticism for the limited range of plants used in their public spaces, but the reality is that few plants will meet the criteria that, in Wolfgang's words, they are 'colourful, leaf-attractive, and long-season'. A lack of adequately trained maintenance staff and the need for plants to be unpalatable to the immensely-destructive herds of deer, which are the curse of gardening in the US, are two of the main limitations on a wider plant selection. In private gardens James and Wolfgang are able to use a greater range of species and cultivars.

Plants are trialled for several years by Wolfgang in his own garden before they are used commercially. This gives the designers an intimate knowledge of their plant material. In the early days, Wolfgang's garden sometimes had to act as a nursery too; as he explains, 'there was very little, if anything, available; no grasses... We had to divide my own plants to do the Federal Reserve garden. Now it is much better: there are many more nurseries. We have started a fashion. Everyone grows our plants.' Grasses are a favourite, not only for their looks but because they require less maintenance and watering than many alternatives. 'We design everything with in-built irrigation,' says



James, 'but once our plantings are established they need a minimum of water.'

Cultivars of the dark-eyed, yellow, daisy-flowered *Rudbeckia fulgida* and of dark pink *Sedum spectabile* are great favourites, used almost always in bold masses. Single plants of grasses such as *Miscanthus* or *Molinia* often act as a dramatic counterpoint, their much taller stems growing out from among the lower perennials. Massed plantings of the grass *Pennisetum alopecuroides* foam out of planters and over walls during autumn and winter – this is a species that relishes a continental climate.

By the sea, salt-resistant plants are used, such as silver-leaved *Perovskia atriplicifolia* and lavenders, contrasted with broad clumps of the erect-growing grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' which, according to James, 'resists 120-mph hurricanes on the east coast.' 'We use 200 or 300 plants of a species or cultivar in one place,' says Wolfgang, 'so it is vital to get the right plant in the right place.'

James once spent three weeks with the Brazilian landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx who was 'a great influence', as can be seen in the clear articulation of contrast between plants and the sweeping, curving

shapes of many of their mass plantings. Mien Ruys, the modernist Dutch designer has also been an influence, as have Japanese gardens with their concept of 'borrowed scenery' and the way in which the viewer is enticed to explore the garden by paths and vistas that lead through layers of foliage.

Wolfgang's training in Germany during the 1950s has provided him with a similar perspective on the mass planting of perennials, which were then used in bold flowing forms, as if rivers of blossom, between larger static masses of more architectural plants.

Classic influences

James is 'constantly looking at art... I love Dutch paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries, their beautiful use of paving and the wonderful feel of courtyards.' All hard landscaping is designed by him and, as with Roberto Burle Marx's work, paving has an important function, especially in private gardens.

In the Trinca Garden in Connecticut, for example, the borders in the front garden are divided up by a dynamic series of square arrangements of bluestone and brick, which psychologically act as steps, enticing the visitor on, but also suggesting that they should >

Above left: James's garden is tiny and architectural, dominated by the cool elegance of foliage such as *Miscanthus floridulus*

Above: *Liriope muscari* 'Big Blue' makes an effective ground cover in light shade, with layers of other perennials beyond



Above: *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' at the rear evokes the prairie and adds scale to characteristic mass plantings of *Sedum*, *Aster* and *Pennisetum*

pause and admire the planting. In a corner of this part of the garden there is a large stone sculpture which acts as a water feature; Wolfgang and James use water wherever possible and if there is no space for standing water, constructions that continuously spout and recycle water are favoured.

In his own garden James has a lantern top that holds only a centimetre of water; it is all that is needed to reflect the sky. 'In Japan I saw how water features occupy a bigger proportion of a given space,' he says. 'I changed my attitude to water: now I use as big a water feature as possible.' The combination I love in the partnership's gardens is that of a large body of water with a mass of the reed-like *Miscanthus sinensis*, which is perfect next to water.

When the partnership takes on a project, it is James who usually starts the master-planning. 'I lay out the hard landscape, the bones,' he says, 'then Wolfgang starts at the planting end, covering up my bones with plants. There is little disagreement.' Much of the planting design is done on site. 'It's like being a sculptor or a painter,' says James. 'We do it right on the spot and do a drawing later.'

Gardens are designed so that they look good from all

directions. James describes how the architecture of the garden has to grow out of the architecture of the building, but there is also a strong awareness of nature. 'If a garden is next to a meadow,' James says, 'then the garden should flow naturally into the wild meadow and draw its unruly beauty towards the house'. I remember visiting the Blumer/Martin Garden, which lies on a tidal creek in New England, where the reeds of the creek were echoed by plantings of grasses such as *Miscanthus* and *Calamagrostis* in the garden. From a distance there was that magical effect of not knowing where the garden ended and nature began.

Lacking opinion

The relationship between client and designer is so different in the US to that in Britain. 'Most of our clients are not gardeners,' explains James. 'They want a dramatic show, they want a garden that runs as smoothly as their new Mercedes. What we're doing is creating a picture, a collage on a grand scale. In a sense it is static – our clients wouldn't think of touching one of our gardens, any more than they would retouch a painting they had bought.' The dynamic that exists between designer and client in Britain, where even




Above: The soft plumes of *Pennisetum alopecuroides* and clumps of Japanese anemones surround a trademark, self-contained water feature

non-gardeners are used to expressing likes and dislikes about plants, is thus lacking. Rarely do they have to deal with a client like plantswoman Rosita Trinca who, while a great admirer, has strong opinions of her own. 'Some of their colour combinations on the plan were just hideous,' she exclaims.

Looking to the future, the partnership are hoping to extend their range of plant material used. Wolfgang is particularly excited about the potential of dark pink-flowered *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail' and *P. polymorpha*, a spectacular, creamy knotweed that flowers all summer. James is almost delirious with excitement over the possibilities of the low-growing grass *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', 'although I don't usually like variegated plants,' he remarks. I was also interested to hear that they are considering a more 'blended' approach to planting.

I have some doubts, however, about the partnership's characteristic mass planting; it does not suit many perennials which, when grown en masse, can look untidy after flowering. However, James says that 'the American public isn't ready for the meadow look. It's too wild. But we are beginning to try combinations, such as *Perovskia* with *Pennisetum* and *Liatris*.'

James paints a lively picture of the office, which now employs some 20 landscape architects. 'Our younger project managers are much more interested in using native plants, and we have done a few meadows and prairies,' he says. 'They're learning a lot from us which they are interpreting in their own way. They have their own opinions. For example, they don't like *Lysimachia* (*L. clethroides*, with white flowers and good autumn colour, is one of Wolfgang's favourite perennials); they scream and protest, and Wolfgang screams back, and so we have a minimum amount of *Lysimachia*, rather than 5,000 square feet of it. We need this give and take... It's a democratic office, except that it has got two dictators on top. Nobody leaves, which is a good sign.'

The ideas of the Oehme-van Sweden partnership are now well established. Through their influence much more of the US is losing its turf and clipped yews to grasses and perennials. But James and Wolfgang are still open to fresh ideas, criticism and controversy. American gardening has finally come of age. 

Noel Kingsbury is a garden writer and designer, particularly interested in new approaches to garden making

Building Stone Magazine

October/November/December 2000

A profile:

James van Sweden, FASLA Oehme, van Sweden and Associates, Inc.



Private residence: Greenwich, Connecticut

Landscape architect James van Sweden, of the Washington firm of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, Inc. has never had a more prominent or controversial headline-grabbing project in the firm's 23-year history than the one the office has now: the proposed World War II memorial on the National Mall.

"We have been working on the design for three and a half years," van Sweden says. "It has been very difficult to please so many kinds of agencies and individuals. You are working for the federal government, and that is impossible."

For one project—this one—consider the "clients": American Battle Monuments Commission (who was authorized by Congress in 1994 to

construct the memorial with private funds), National Park Service, Commission of Fine Arts, National Capitol Planning Commission and Historic Review Board.

"It is very complex," van Sweden says. "In addition, it must have tacit approval from the community. It is a difficult job bringing all of this together. And it is in a very controversial place—a very high profile location between the Lincoln and Washington monuments. It is the most prestigious job we have ever had."

The brouhaha concerning the memorial is not about whether there

should be a memorial to America's role in the bloodiest conflict in history but, as van Sweden states, the plans to place it on the National Mall, the two-mile long landscaped open space that extends from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol.

A chief proponent for the memorial is former Majority Leader and 1996 Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole. In an opinion piece published on June 6, the 56th anniversary of D-Day, Dole noted that an average of 300 American fighters died every day of the war, and pointed out that "—the veterans of that war are now passing away in even greater numbers. Before the World War II generation is gone, we owe them one last salute, and the peace of mind that their service will be



Private residence: Greenwich, Connecticut

remembered," wrote Dole, who was badly wounded fighting in Italy during that war.

Yet, other fellow World War II veterans used the D-Day anniversary to counter with their own opinions. Said one, the chairman of the Veterans to Save the National Mall, "I want to honor all who served in World War II, but in a way that respects our history and the heritage of the National Mall." Another voiced opposition to the proposed siting, added that a "far superior site" would be across the Potomac River in Arlington on the grounds of the old Naval Annex to the Pentagon a site overlooking Arlington National Cemetery.

The National Park Service controls the federal lands in the city. It had identified six possible sites for the memorial, but not the currently proposed location at the Rainbow pool, an elliptical pond almost midway between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. The Fine Arts Commission, however, criticized the Park Service sites as "not prominent enough" and selected the Rainbow Pool location.

Current thinking is that the Rain-



Private residence: Westchester County, New York

Photo: James van Sweden



Private residence: Winchester, Virginia

bow Pool site will prevail. As Senator Dole said at a recent news conference, "I didn't pick the site, but I don't think there is any question whether it will be built there."

Not that any one project can overshadow the work Oehme, van Sweden has produced since its founding in the late 1970s. The firm's widely diversified mix of residential and non-residential clients includes public agencies, institutions, private businesses, and home owners. Work in progress or completed extends geographically to at least 23 states, the District of Columbia, Argentina, Australia, Canada, and Germany.

The firm's residential work ranges in scale from town gardens to rural estates and multi family communities. Non-residential credits include botanic gardens, zoos, parks, college campuses, retail and office centers, airport terminals, embassies, and corporate headquarters.

James van Sweden's journey from being the son of a Grand Rapids, Michigan, building contractor, through architectural school and to the prominent role he plays today in land-

scape architecture began, he believes, as a youth. "I was always more interested in the space between buildings than the buildings themselves," he says.

"I always consider that our work starts at the sill—from the sill of a building—out. And I also truly believe that we are sculptors of the land and that we protect the environment and the natural world," he says. "As landscape architects we create space and articulate the use of it for people who are going to be living in it."

His firm's professional staff consists of seventeen landscape architects, one urban planner, and six technical support personnel. Wolfgang Oehme, founding principal and chairman of the board is a distinguished horticulturist with more than 40 years of professional experience in the United States and abroad. van Sweden, the firm's founding principal and president, is a multi-disciplinary designer whose talents encompass architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. Both founding principals have been elected Fellows of the American Society of Landscape Architects.



Private residence: Winchester, Virginia

Photo: James van Sweden



Private residence: Greenwich, Connecticut



Private residence: Winchester, Virginia

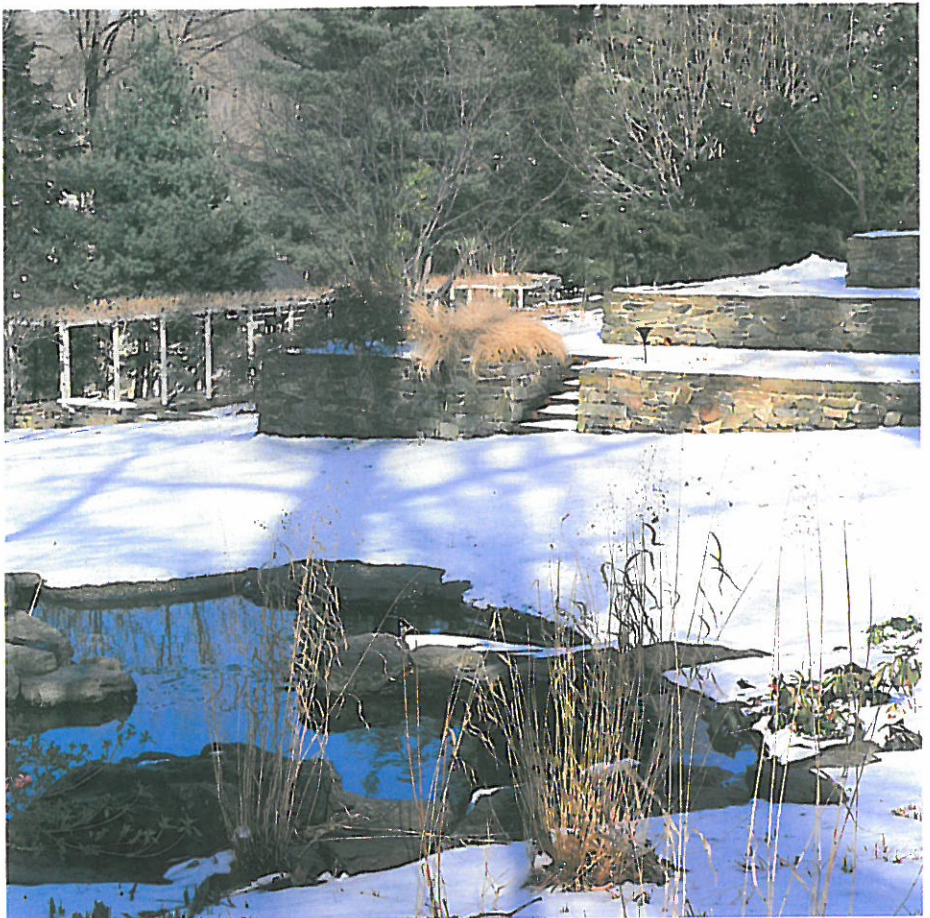
Photo: James van Sweden

Other principals are Sheila Brady, ASLA, vice president; Eric Graft, ASLA, vice president; and Charles Turner, AICP, executive vice president.

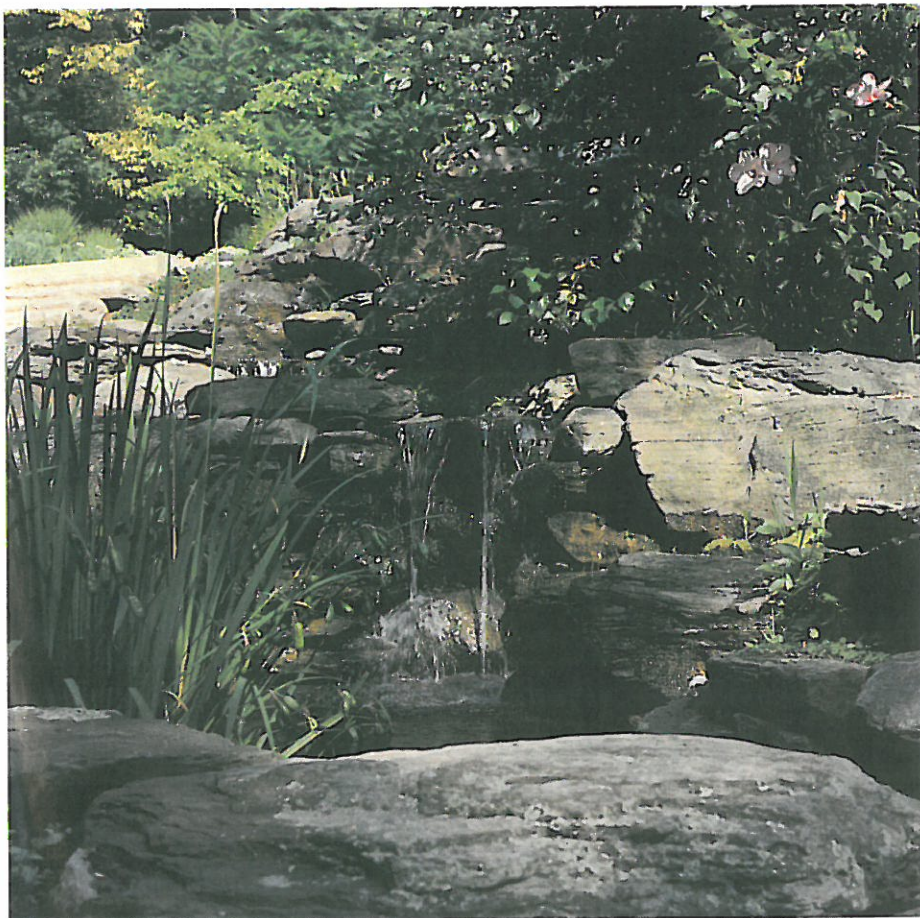
The staff's cumulative professional experience totals more than 240 years of work, almost half of which are assignments for the firm. Eighteen staff members hold degrees in landscape architecture or urban planning—most at the masters level. Eleven are members of the American Society of Landscape Architects. Two are charter members of the American Institute of Certified Planners, and eight hold state registrations in landscape architecture.

Design Philosophy

In addition to the American Battle Monuments commission, mentioned earlier, the firm's non-residential design clients include, or have included, Battery Park City Authority in New York; Chicago Botanic Garden; the City of St. Louis; Congressional Country Club, Bethesda, Maryland; Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation; as well as the Universi-



Private residence: Bedford Hills, New York



Private residence: Winchester, Virginia

ties of Minnesota, Utah, and Virginia, respectively. In addition the firm's residential clients have seen the work of Oehme, van Sweden represented nationally in areas such as Martha's Vineyard; Sag Harbor; East Hampton; South Bend, Indiana; Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Saginaw, Michigan, among others, and internationally, in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Oehme, van Sweden and Associates, Inc. maintain offices at 800 G Street, S.E., Washington, DC 20003. Telephone: (202) 546-7575. Telefax: (202) 546-1035.

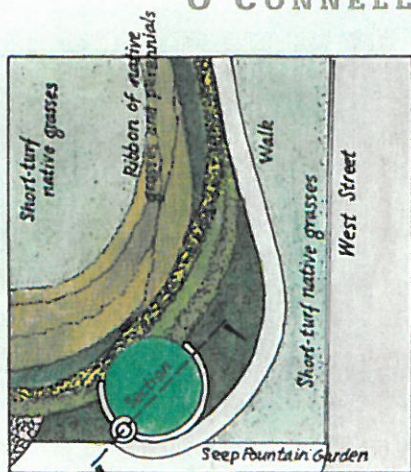
WATER IN THE DETAILS

Both small-scale residential fountains and a larger-scale urban project reveal that water features can be powerful without being overpowering.

BY KIM A. O'CONNELL

In his 1943 fable, *The Little Prince*, French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote famously of a "very simple" secret to the meaning of life. It is only with the heart, he wrote, "that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." It is a simple, even intuitive lesson, but an obviously difficult one for designers to follow. Design elements are often striking, boldly colored, or reiterated to ensure that they are seen—and seen rightly, according to their creators. Water features in the landscape are no exception. Large geometric pools with nymphs spouting curving streams of water characterize numerous gardens of prominence. An extreme example can be found at the new Bellagio Resort in Las Vegas. The extravagant hotel and casino is fronted by a large replica of Italy's Lake Como, with interconnected fountains spraying undulating waves of water in time to songs from MGM musicals. Although these ostentatious displays may please Vegas's vacationers, they are arguably feasts for the eyes more than the heart.

Sometimes it is the less-showy fountain that has the power to touch one in



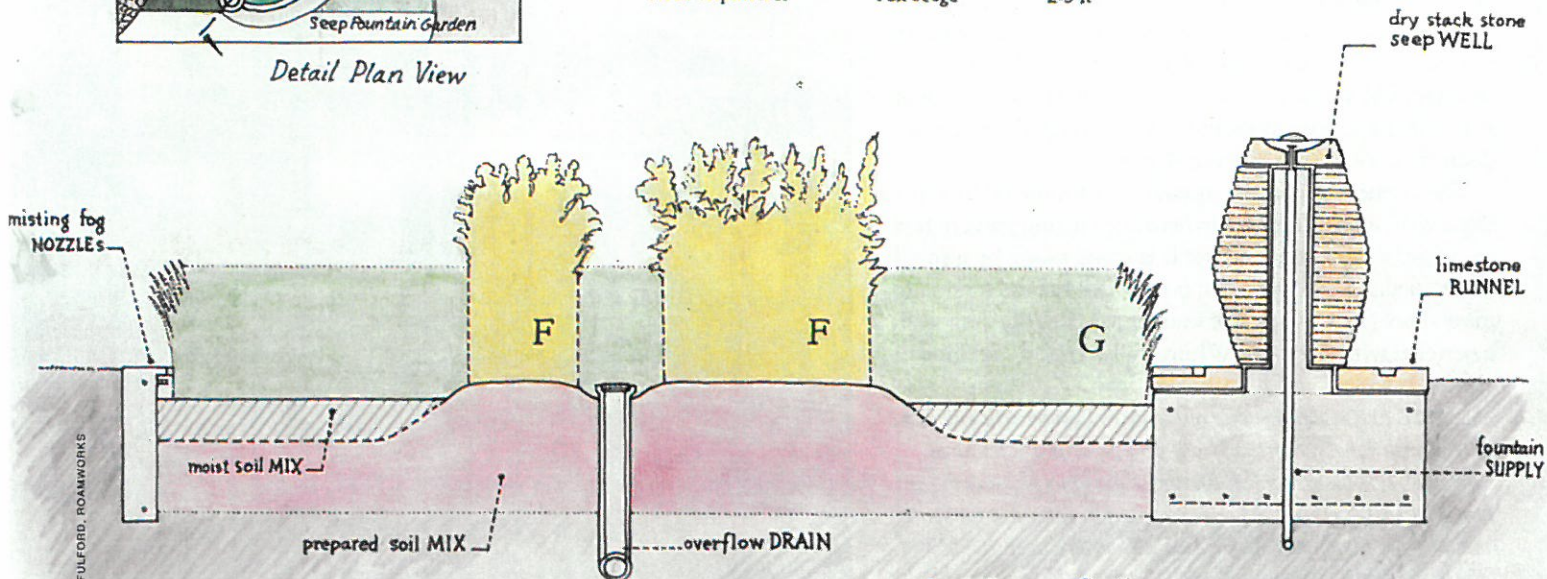
Detail Plan View

F 4-6 ft tall Drifts of Native Perennials that Tolerate Wet Soil

Asclepias incarnata	Marsh Milkweed	3-4 ft, pink, July-August
Aster Puniceus	Swamp Aster	4-6 ft, lavender, fall
Eupatorium perfoliatum	Boneset	3-5 ft, white, August-September
Filipendula rubra	Queen of the Paine	4-6 ft, pink, June-July
Helenium autumnale	Autumn Sneezeweed	3-5 ft, yellow, September-October

G 2-3 ft tall Sedges that Tolerate Wet Soil

Carex cristatella	Crested Sedge	2-3 ft
Carex stricta	Tussock Sedge	2-3 ft
Carex vulpinoidea	Fox Sedge	2-3 ft



Seep Fountain Section
EITELJORG MUSEUM

a more profound way. Water is always a draw in a landscape, of course, but some fountains are content to be less-prominent players on an outdoor stage. In intimate spaces and garden rooms, a trickle of water can be a soothing, important presence whether the water feature makes a bold artistic statement or not. "Even if the part it plays is a small one," writes James van Sweden, FASLA, in his 1995 book, *Gardening with Water*; "water will magnify the pleasures of your private paradise." Sometimes the benefit is aural, the patter of drops a dulcet distraction from the harsh sounds of a working life.

In all fountains, to be sure, what is essential usually is invisible to the eye: the plumbing and the pump systems that make water appear to flow out of a structure as naturally as a mountain spring. Yet when the scale is not as imposing, the challenge for the landscape architect is to design and place a fountain without consuming too much space for the engineering, breaking the budget, or, most importantly, overpowering the landscape. Ideally, these structures should not remind one of the sprinkler system irrigating the lawn down the street, but instead add to the sense of peace that allows one to truly see a place with the heart.

In many cases, these kinds of fountains are well suited to residential gardens, where the scale may be smaller (but not necessarily small), and where emotional connections to the land are already strong. Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in Washington, D.C., has recently designed fountains for two residences that are impressive yet understated, whose success is dependent as much on their placement in the landscape as on their design. Even on a larger scale, ROAMworks's plan for a seep garden in the firm's home base of Indianapolis offers a subtle yet magnetic approach to designing with water.

The garden rooms and fountains designed by Oehme, van Sweden for a residence in Purchase, New York, create "layers of mystery," van Sweden says. The owners initially wanted an intimate enclave—a secret garden—to extend from the renovated master bedroom of their English Cotswold Hills-style cottage. The nine-acre grounds originally were dark spaces—with large shade trees, a brick terrace, and drab garden beds. The firm seized the opportunity to create an unfolding series of garden rooms that echo the architectural vernacular of the house, with each outdoor space having a counterpart indoors. Although the rooms are distinct, stone is the unifying element.

The kitchen garden, for instance, is surrounded by a low stone wall, which contains an herb and cutting garden. It is an informal, shaded place, yet it is made exotic by a small fountain along one wall. A spout hidden behind a ceramic mask shoots a cool stream of water into a dark dipping well, bejeweled with lily pads. Whimsically termed the "God of

AN ARTS-AND-CRAFTS style residence in Connecticut eschews the traditional manicured front yard in favor of a textured meadow of grasses and shrubs, right. The lotus blossom fountain, top, was deemed the perfect element to galvanize the space, according to James van Sweden. As water spills over the sides of the silver granite structure, algae has stained the fountain black in a distinctive pattern, making it resemble a ripe gourd.



RICHARD FELBER, BOTH



the North Wind” by the firm, which found the piece in a storehouse of architectural artifacts in New York, the fountain is reminiscent of historic Islamic fountains and also designs from the Greco-Roman period. Van Sweden admits that the mask does not necessarily fit with the English country architecture; it functions more as a focal point, like “something you can arrange furniture around,” he says. The architecture of the house is mimicked in the brick wall holding the mask, itself framed by large, blue-gray stones. Despite the mask’s menacing visage, a low ledge along the well invites one to sit, “rest a pail of water,” as van Sweden says, and contemplate the day. Essential to the mystery is the simple recirculating pump system that keeps the water moving, all hidden from view.

A stone path directs you through the various rooms, past a circular lily pool and beyond, until a certain point where the path disappears. A high stone gate beckons, and upon passing through it the secret bedroom garden is revealed. Here the wall is higher for seclusion, with a terrace con-

SOMETIMES THE BENEFIT IS AURAL, THE PATTERN OF DROPS A DULCET DISTRACTION FROM THE HARSH SOUNDS OF A WORKING LIFE.

structed of sandstone squares in grids of brick. The centerpiece of the garden is a custom-made rectangular granite cistern, with a handmade bronze spout. Water pours into a rustic trough, into which two brass bars are notched, offering the illusion that one might fill a watering can here to tend to the surrounding garden. In reality, the fountain is important not for irrigation, but for the nostalgia of times gone by that it elicits. In time, the piece will become distressed and will grow moss, looking like the well-used pump of an old English farmhouse. “It looks utilitarian, but it’s completely decorative,” van Sweden confides. “It’s theater.”

The antecedent, he continues, for these modest (but not quite utilitarian), bold (but not quite lavish) structures can be found in Japanese gardens, where one might see elegant basins of water not just for show, but also for *(Continued on Page 88)*

AN ENGLISH Cotswold Hills-style cottage in New York is the inspiration for a series of garden rooms designed by Oehme, van Sweden & Associates. The private bedroom garden is marked by a simple rustic fountain, top, meant to resemble the well-used pump of an old English farmhouse. By contrast, the wall-mask fountain in the kitchen garden, bottom, is not meant to fit with the architecture, but instead to be a focal point.

JAMES VAN SWEDEN, TOP; RICHARD FELBER, BOTTOM

Water in the Details

(Continued from Page 77) guests to purify their hands in before sitting down to tea.

A sense of subdued drama also exists at a 1920s-era residence in Greenwich, Connecticut, a carefully restored “arts and crafts” house that is well positioned for elevated garden views from rooms, balconies, and stairways. At the back of the house, Oehme, van Sweden designed a terrace garden and large lily pool ringed by circles of cobblestone. The design is informal and exactly in proportion to its surroundings, van Sweden says. A single jet of water adds motion, yet the space is still refined and quiet.

The expansive front yard required even more forbearance because of space and safety issues. The yard is distinguished by the fact that the lawn is not manicured, but rather a wild meadow of grasses and shrubs. It needed something to “galvanize the space,” van Sweden says. The solution came in the form of a graceful but prominent freestanding fountain in the shape of a lotus blossom. A bubbling spout of water collects in a small pool at the top of the lotus, which spills over the sides and seeps through a bed of rounded stones. Water is collected in a reservoir beneath the ground, where it is pumped up again.

For this piece, van Sweden was inspired by a similar 1920s sculpture crafted in bronze by Carl Milles, which he saw at the Cranbrook Academy. “It’s almost art deco,” he says. “It went perfectly.” A striking aspect of the front yard, the fountain was carefully placed for view from several perspectives. From the driveway, the eye is drawn to the house at an acute angle, with the fountain in the line of sight, a focal point among the fuzzy textures of the yard. From a stairwell in the house, one can stop at a key front window and look down at the structure. Perhaps what is most interesting is the design formed by algae growing on the moist sides of the fountain. The algae has blackened the silver granite in a distinctive pattern, giving it the appearance of a ripe gourd and making organic what was once simply stone. Some things are “out of the hands of designers,” van Sweden explains simply. “Water creates many surprises.”

Yet water, he is careful to point out, is an “imperfect technology.” Many times clients would love a water feature but are turned off by daunting fears of maintenance, he says.

An added benefit of small-scale fountains like these is that they are often able to be operated on basically low-tech systems that collect, pump, and recirculate water through the structure. Often a simple trigger system, much like that in a commode, can bring in more water from a domestic water supply if needed, or drain water if the system overflows. Many prefabricated systems are on the market. Beyond that, regular cleaning or annual drainage in cold climates may be all the maintenance required. Still, landscape architects benefit from understanding the challenges and requirements of installing and maintaining such systems (see Details in this issue).

Certainly, an intimate residential garden is quite different from a heavily trafficked urban intersection. If a blossom-shaped fountain or wall mask fits the scale of a residence, then an intersection ought to be able to support a more extravagant fountain on a grander scale. Yet it might be more challenging for a landscape architect to design such a fountain with subtlety when the temptation to “design big” is so great. For a street-corner fountain linked to the expansion of Indianapolis’s Eiteljorg Museum of the American Indian and Western Art (see “A Canal Runs Through It,” May 1999), Eric Fulford, of local firm ROAMworks, appears to be up to that challenge.

The museum is part of a larger compound of landscapes that will encompass both the state’s planned Indiana Museum and the White River State Park, and multilayered efforts are under way to establish and emphasize connections among these sites. The Eiteljorg is situated along a very visible corner, the intersection of the city’s West and Washington streets. Although the grounds of the museum are known for Alan Sonfist’s piece of environmental art, *Time Landscape*, the museum also creates its own ethnographic art, set on a high circular base that recalls a kiva. The museum is adding a circular red tower to the base, invoking the ancient stonework of the pueblo Indians of Hovenweep.

An earthen ramp extending south from the museum once pointed to a beloved street-side fountain. Designed by Fulford in partnership with architect Jonathan Hess of Browning Day Mullins Dierdorf (BDMD), the structure featured sculptures of running deer splashing mightily

through a pool of water. When the fountain was torn down in preparation for the expansion, public outcry was great. Re-hired by BDMD to design the expanded museum’s outdoor environment, Fulford has redesigned the running deer fountain so sorely missed by visitors. He has also configured a smaller, less obvious fountain as a sensual counterpoint.

To provide a lyrical, descriptive link between spaces, Fulford has designed liquid ribbons of landscape to be planted with native grasses and perennials, creating a mesic prairie community around the museum. However, a typical Midwestern prairie would not do. Reflecting the very mission of the museum, Fulford has attempted to represent a landscape that draws subtly on the color and texture of indigenous landscapes from the Southwest up to Indianapolis. The resurrected deer fountain had to make sense in this environment as well. Given the strong shape of the museum base, and its anthropological antecedent, the fountain naturally will be circular as well. Fulford also shifted its placement toward the intersection. “The thing the previous deer fountain had failed to do was occupy the corner,” he says.

The other thing the fountain had failed to do was be visible to passengers in cars driving by. Set below grade, travelers could see the deer, and the splashes of water, but not the surface itself. In the new design, a family of deer again burst forth from tall grasses to splash through a glistening pool, evoking the spirit and the freedom of the West, but the fountain will be elevated, with a quarter of the circle cut away to create a weir. “The weir is not there to create a cascade,” Fulford says, “but to create an edge, to see the deer impacting the fountain and the spray.” The fountain depends on a relatively simple recirculation and filtering system (with the pump stored in the museum’s garage underground) that practically takes care of itself.

Less conspicuous but no less evocative, however, is the plan for a tranquil grass garden next to the deer fountain. Here a smaller-scale seep fountain will feed a moist circular sedge garden that hooks off a sweeping walkway leading to the deer. Here the geometry and fluidity of the museum, the landscape, and the deer fountain will be married in one place. The sedge garden will be anchored on one end by a

six- to eight-foot limestone cairn, a primitive beehive form that indicates intimacy and shelter. Water will bubble up out of the cairn and weep down into a collection basin, ringed by a limestone runnel. The seep is an expression, according to Fulford, of the "fullness, vigor, and ripeness of nature from the source of life itself, water."

The trickle of water from the cairn in turn will nourish moist soils beneath a circular bed of grass. The fountain draws upon stormwater collected in a basin nearby. This moist haven will be planted with three kinds of two- to three-foot sedges that "love to have their feet in that," Fulford says. The blue-green palette consists of crested sedge (*Carex crinitella*), tussock sedge (*Carex stricta*), and fox sedge (*Carex vulpinoides*). Taller drifts of native perennials that tolerate wet soil will be planted in loose conglomerations in the center of the sedge grasses. The effect is quietly dramatic, and periodically intensified by jets of fog that feed moisture to the sedge garden, creating a humid microclimate. Passing breezes, according to Fulford, will lift and swirl the mists and invite "wistful imaginings." Or, put another way, they will foster seeing with the heart.

The deer fountain is expected to be completed and operational this summer. The seep garden fountain will be folded into one of the two upcoming phases of museum expansion, with construction of the first phase beginning this fall.

Water structures that echo primitive Native American art or make one yearn for the English countryside may be a far cry from the technological marvels of a glitzy Las Vegas resort fountain, but many people will still prefer the peaceful music of a small-scale fountain. Large or small, rare is the space that cannot be subtly enhanced by a modest, well-suited water feature.

"They're beautiful as a sculptural element in a secret place," James van Sweden says. "They're also beautiful in the foreground of a larger space. It's a focal point—like a fireplace—that can pull you in." **LA**

PROJECT CREDITS

New York residence

Landscape architects: Oehme, van Sweden & Associates (project team: James van Sweden, FASLA; Eric Groft, ASLA; Robert Hruby, ASLA).

Contractors: Gardens by Jeffrey Jones (manufacture and installation of kitchen

garden fountain); Miller & Raved (Andrew Chastant; installation of bedroom garden fountain, which was made by an undisclosed manufacturer in China).

Connecticut residence

Landscape architects: Oehme, van Sweden & Associates (project team: James van Sweden, FASLA; Eric Groft, ASLA).

Contractor: Gardens by Jeffrey Jones: (manufacture and installation).

The Seep Garden

Fountain design team: Eric Fulford & Ann Reed, ROAMworks (landscape architects); Jonathan Hess, Browning Day Mullins Dierdorf (architects).

CONSTRUCTION PHASE:

Project architect: Scott Wallace, BDMD.

Project landscape architect: Darren Reno, BDMD.

General contractor: Hagerman Construction Corporation.

Landscape contractor & native plants: Spence Restoration Nursery.

Fountain engineering & equipment: The Fountain People.

Stone: Halquist Stone; Vetter Stone Company; and the Bybee Stone Company.

RESOURCES

A partial list of relevant books:

Gardening with Water by James van Sweden, FASLA. Random House, 1995. Discusses the design, construction, planting, and care of all manner of water features.

Water in the Garden: A Complete Guide to the Design and Installation of Ponds, Fountains, Streams, and Waterfalls, by James Allison. Bulfinch Press, 1991. Illustrated with 250 color photographs; explains design principles and construction hints.

Waterfalls, Fountains, Pools & Streams: Designing & Building Water Features in Your Garden, by Helen Nash, Eamonn Hughes (Contributor). Sterling Publications, 1997. Information on basic installation, pump selection, plumbing, fountain accessories, and maintenance.

Water Features for Small Gardens, by Ethne Clarke. Ward Lock Ltd., 1998. Includes fourteen step-by-step projects to design formal and informal water features.

Fountains: Splash and Spectacle: Water and Design from the Renaissance to the Present, by Marilyn Symmes (Editor), Kenneth A. Breisch (Editor). Rizzoli Bookstore, 1998. Describes hundreds of fountains, from drinking fountains to Roman structures.

Although not comprehensive, the following list features manufacturers that produce off-the-shelf or custom-made freestanding fountains and other water features:

AES (Aquatic Equipment & Services), 619-279-1204

Air-O-Lator, 816-363-4242

A&M Victorian, 626-575-0693

Aqua Master, 920-693-3121

Art Design Group, 717-290-1303

Celtic Cross, Mystic Caravan, 703-352-6995

Fountain People, www.fountainpeople.com, 512-392-1155

Haddonstone, Ltd., 609-931-7011

Kenneth Lynch and Sons, www.klynchandsons.com, 203-762-8363

Lake Fountain & Aeration, 407-327-1080

Quarry Line, Inc., www.quarryline.com, 847-808-0477

Randolph Rose Collection, 914-423-2047

Red Hogan Enterprises, 800-919-0080

Roman Fountains, 505-343-8082

Stone Forest, Inc., 505-986-8883

Stonewear Architectural Shapes, 800-356-2462

United Design Corporation, www.united-design.com, 405-872-3468

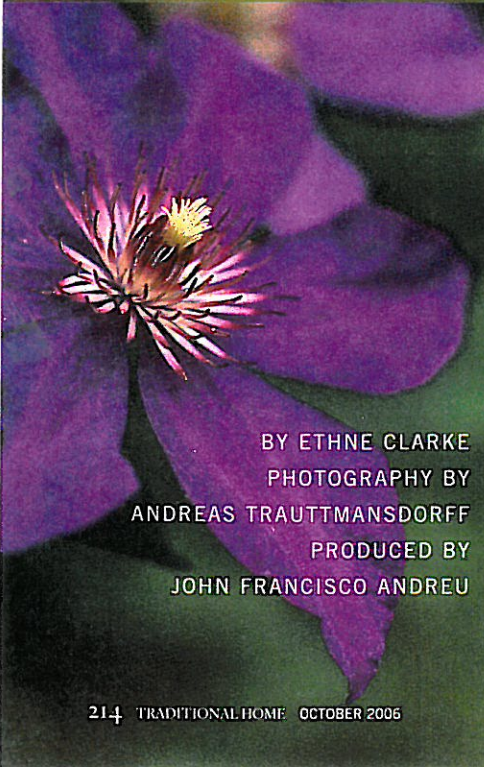
Urban Images, 519-894-9498

Watermark Bronze Fountains, www.watermarkfountain.wa.com/katem, 206-706-9646

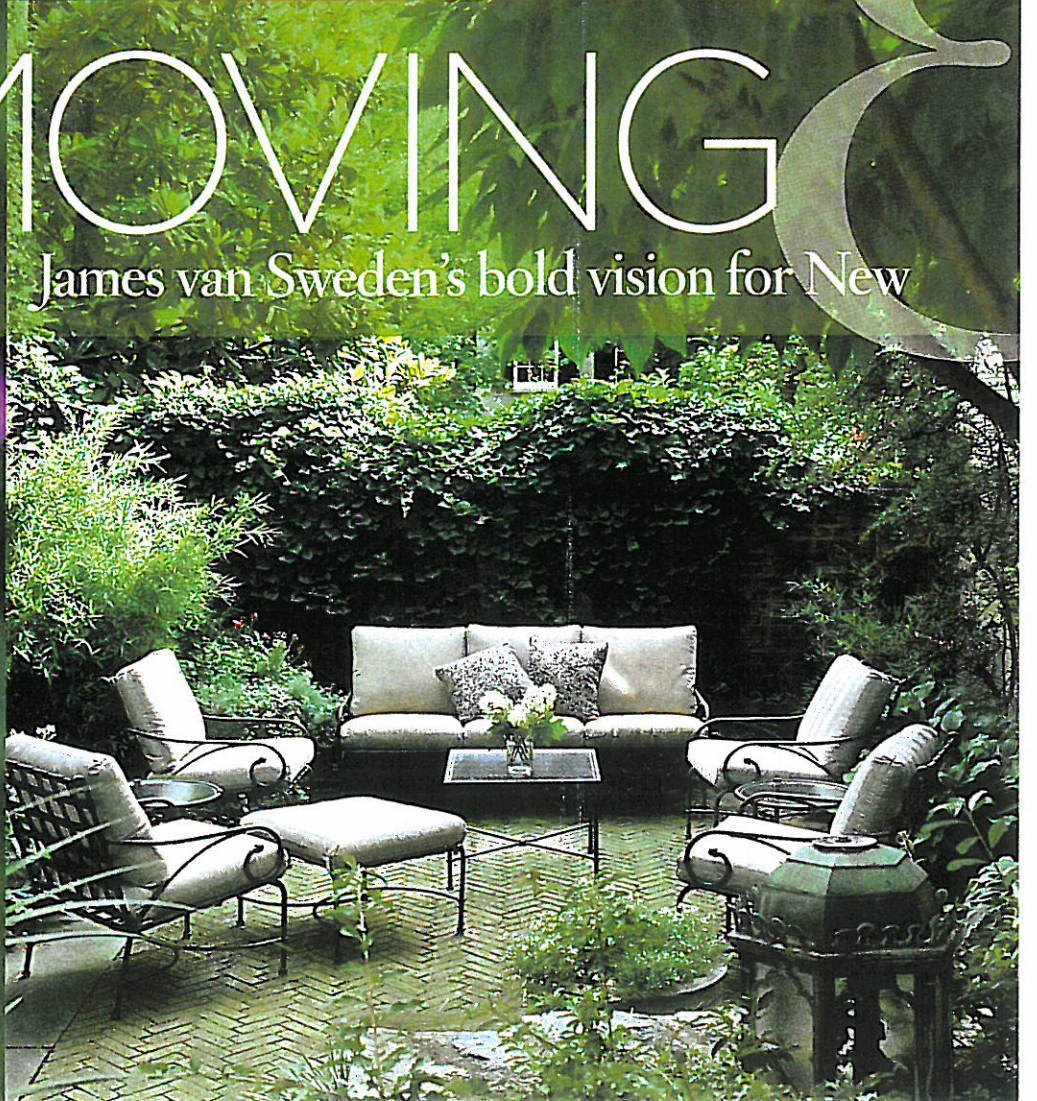


MOVING

James van Sweden's bold vision for New



BY ETHNE CLARKE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ANDREAS TRAUTTMANSDORFF
PRODUCED BY
JOHN FRANCISCO ANDREU





SHAKING

American Gardens finds focus in three small spaces.

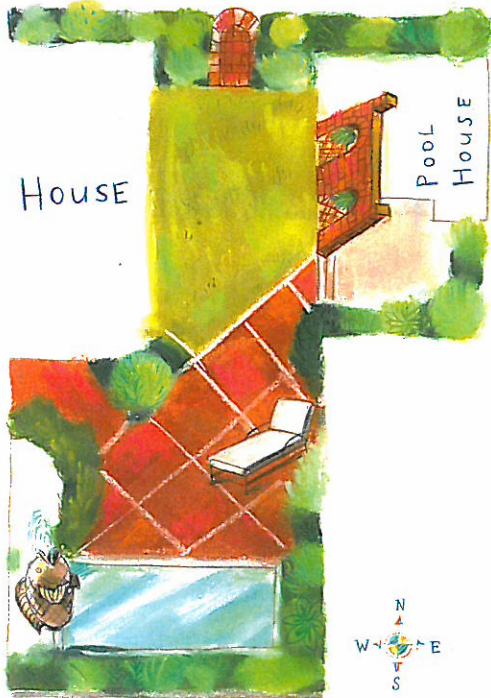


With his innovative designs for public and residential gardens, iconic landscape architect James van Sweden pioneered a new direction for contemporary American garden style. His gardens are characterized by broad swaths of sturdy perennials selected for texture, form, and their enduring presence in the garden, and a perfection of detail in every aspect of the garden's construction—qualities that are immediately apparent in his designs for city courtyards.





BRILLEMBOURG
garden



Opposite: Setting courtyard paving on the diagonal enhanced the sense of space in Arturo and Hilda Brillembourg's garden. **Clockwise from top left:** Modest blooms of St. John's wort. ■ Arturo and Cuddles. ■ Relocated to the end of the garden and given a fountain trim, the swimming pool multitasks as a garden ornament. ■ Contrasts of foliage size add a lively dynamic to the garden planting.

The frontiers of style are continually being pushed forward as creative

individuals shape their oeuvre and try to find a language of design—one that suits them, their clients, and the place and time in which they live. For the internationally renowned American landscape partnership of James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme, the shift was inspired by a need to break out of the English-style perennial-border mold to invent a design vocabulary for modern American gardens. Turning to meadows and prairies for inspiration, and pooling their expertise as plantsmen and designers, Oehme and van Sweden evolved a style that set landscape design on its head and became popularly known as the “New American Garden.”

In the introduction to their book, *Bold Romantic Gardens: The New World Landscape of Oehme and van Sweden*, van Sweden describes their early years: “We were like sculptors working as a team,” he says, recalling the humor as well as the mistakes that proved to be their most valuable learning experiences.

Their landscape firm, Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, was formed in 1977 and is based in Washington, D.C. Their early commissions included public gardens throughout the capital, which, van Sweden explains, were opportunities waiting to happen—opportunities previously thwarted by the city’s monumental architecture, its oppressively “hot hardscape,” and the “plastic evergreen look” resulting from the local love affair with azaleas.

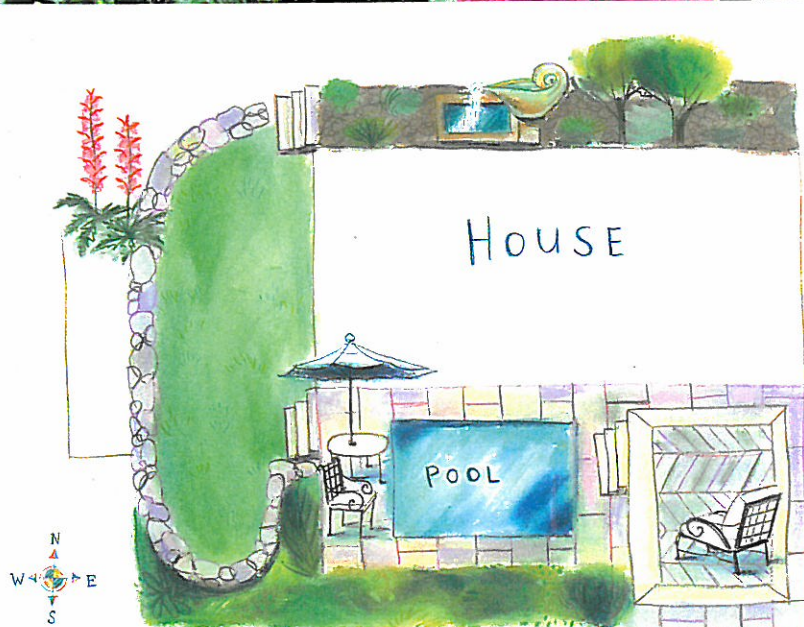
The three small courtyard gardens featured here are from the firm’s portfolio of residential projects. These commissions taught the partners that their Washington clients liked to make bold statements. “Our clients,” avows van Sweden, “are not conformists.”

All three homes are located in Georgetown, a salubrious district where tree-shaded streets are lined with period townhouses representing an index of early American architecture. Most sit squarely on the pavement, limiting opportunities to create a garden interlude between street and house front.

Opposite: The swimming pool is another play space in this small garden, which has been made to seem larger by the diversity of its plan and the captivating intricacy of its detail.

Right: Every part of a small garden should be beautifully detailed: A fountain by John Dreyfuss is the dining area's focal point. Far right: Garden lighting should be discreet.

Below: Each area of Robert and Mary Moore's garden has a distinct character: The lawn is used for croquet tournaments.



“Our goal is to design the garden as an enveloping composition that uses the entire visual and physical space available to us,” says van Sweden, describing his firm’s approach. For them, gardens are like theater-in-the-round—the action can be seen from every quarter, and because of the diminutive size of some gardens, they will also be enjoyed up close and personal. This requires a meticulous eye for detail and finish in the hardscaping as well as in the plant selection and—most crucially—once the garden is established, in the garden’s maintenance.

Lawn is not something van Sweden favors, and in small schemes, turf is definitely not on the playlist. Small garden spaces are often overshadowed by neighboring buildings, so grass doesn’t get enough light to do well, and maintaining a minuscule lawn doesn’t repay the time and energy expended. Better instead to use good-quality brick or stone to provide a durable, usable surface in a pattern that will visually enlarge the space. As van Sweden points out, “To come in through the garden gate and stand on an axis would be boring.”

In Arturo and Hilda Brillembourg’s garden, a grid of red-brick and limestone stringers was laid diagonally to the back of the house. A swimming pool positioned in the garden’s center would also be predictably boring and eat up a huge chunk of the small space. The solution was to site the pool at the back edge of the garden, almost out of sight. “It’s a small, urban garden with a lot of hardscape that has held up extremely well,” Arturo says. “We use it all the time when entertaining.”

Exceptions to the no-turf rule are made, however, when the client has specific needs—and a couple of children qualify for an exemption. For Robert and Mary Moore, a small lawn area was originally incorporated to provide a secure children’s play space. “Paths, walls, and stairs were put in to make the levels work together,” Mary explains, “so that the back and side areas now seem like one open, much larger garden.”

Exigencies of modern life that van Sweden regards as intrusive are driveways and garages, and he encourages clients to de-emphasize them. In his experience, the space devoted to the



In with the new

Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden's innovative planting style owes much to Oehme's interest in Karl Foerster, an early-20th-century German nurseryman renowned for his work with ornamental grasses. Foerster was an influence on generations of garden designers who, following his lead, focused on grouping perennials according to shared cultural requirements in order to establish mutually compatible, self-sustaining plant communities and create gardens that look good all year long. German landscape designer Rosemary Weisse, known for her interpretation of alpine meadows in Munich's Westpark (*above*), is of this school, while the late Richard Hansen, a professor of horticulture at Weihenstephan, a technical college in Germany, wrote *Perennials and Their Garden Habitats* (published stateside in 1993). Produced after 30 years of research, the text describes perennials by their shared ecological preferences and was one of the first modern guides to use this new approach to gardening.

Today, recognizing that the "natural" style of garden design, with its ecological foundations and environmentally-friendly practices, is the best way forward, European designers like Gilles Clement, Piet Oudolf, and Noel Kingsbury and Americans like Gary Ratway, Oehme and van Sweden, and Steve Martino have encouraged gardeners on both sides of the Atlantic to layer ecological considerations into their perennial planting.



SULLIVAN
garden



car is often positioned front and center, thus hiding the house behind it. But by repositioning the garage and driveway when possible and replacing them with a garden, houses can be reconnected to their surroundings. In small urban gardens, where space is at a premium, he finds the fact that some homeowners are tearing out front gardens to provide off-street parking especially distasteful.

At Beverly and John Sullivan's home in Georgetown, van Sweden found that while the interiors were vibrant with the couple's collections of Haitian art and contemporary painting, a three-bay garage and a concrete-paved yard made the exterior

uninviting. Shifting the off-street parking to the side of the house and morphing the garage into a summer house, van Sweden was then able to organize the garden space to unfold from the kitchen—the hub of the Sullivan household. Says Beverly: "James gave me the 'swish-swish' garden I wanted, yet it has a very definite structure underneath; it's so perfect, I'm trying it out at our country place."

In *Bold Romantic Gardens*, van Sweden explains that when space is at a premium, plants must be hard workers to make the cut; while flowers come and go, foliage endures. Broad-leaved, glossy evergreens bring patches of reflected light into dark corners; fine-leaved, softly textured plants recede, giving the appearance of depth.

By selecting plants that are mutually compatible, a durable, relatively low-maintenance planting scheme can be achieved, one that will mature into an impressive backdrop for the house—and give the garden "swish." ■

For more information, see sources on page 244.

Left: The lily pool in Beverly and John Sullivan's garden is skewed across the main axis. Sculptures are by Mary Brownstein.

Clockwise from top left: Beverly and English toy spaniel Scarlett. ■ Oakleaf hydrangea is a good shrub for year-long garden interest. ■ The Sullivans' other English toy spaniels, Teddy and Harry, are also loyal garden lovers. ■ "Crazy paving" paths lead to the summer house.

ILLUSTRATION: ANN BOYAUJIAN

GARDEN

D E S I G N

3 NATURAL

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Left: So much glass makes Jim van Sweden feel exposed at times, but this view of the Chesapeake from the living room is unhindered by privacy plantings. Right: Once a soybean field, the meadow between the house and the bay grows tall grasses that contrast with the forms of flowering perennials like the white Queen Anne's lace.

NATURAL BEAUTY

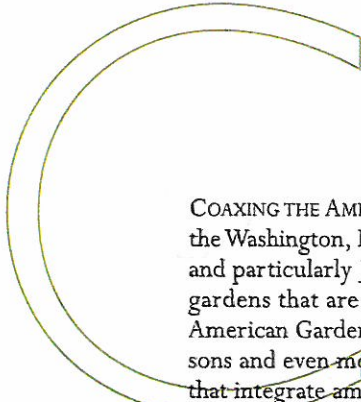
FIELD OF DREAMS

At James van Sweden's garden on Chesapeake Bay, planting design blends with nature and nature mutates with the seasons



BY SARAH KINBAR PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER FOLEY






COAXING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE TOWARD GENTLE ABSTRACTIONS OF ITSELF, the Washington, D.C., landscape architecture firm Oehme, van Sweden—and particularly Jim van Sweden—looks to the land as a muse, designing gardens that are much like meadows found in nature. Tagged the “New American Garden,” an Oehme, van Sweden meadowscape accepts the seasons and even morphs as it matures, supporting the emergence of natives that integrate among and sometimes replace the original plantings.

It’s only natural that van Sweden’s own garden in Ferry Cove on Maryland’s Eastern Shore would be acres of meadow, a view framed by a comparatively formal garden close to his house.

Previously, the 3-acre lot was a soybean field. “I loved it because it was so Dutch—a flat landscape. My fantasy has always been to have a house that floated over a meadow,” says van Sweden, giving away his heritage if his last name isn’t enough of a clue. “I started the garden by cleaning up the pine hedgerow along the northern edge of the property, which was choked with poison ivy,” Van Sweden says. “I did it myself; it was fun and therapeutic.”

To prepare the site for the meadow, van Sweden killed off the soybeans. Next, he began a series of plantings that emphasized natives and garden varieties bred from them. He wanted a garden that didn’t require irrigation, pesticides or more than an annual mowing, though thistles are removed regularly.

Early on, the plantings had a quilted look with large, almost geometric patches of flowering perennials among native wetland grasses and sedges like salt marsh and soft-stem bulrushes,



Although hackberries (*Celtis*) are not usually regarded as good garden trees, Wolfgang Oehme knew they belonged here and he planted a large specimen in the center of the deck. Neat rows of *Schizachyrium scoparium* and *Coreopsis tripteris* form a buffer between the deck and the meadow, with the bay beyond.

who’s in the garden? SEEN: Writer Rosita Trinko, July

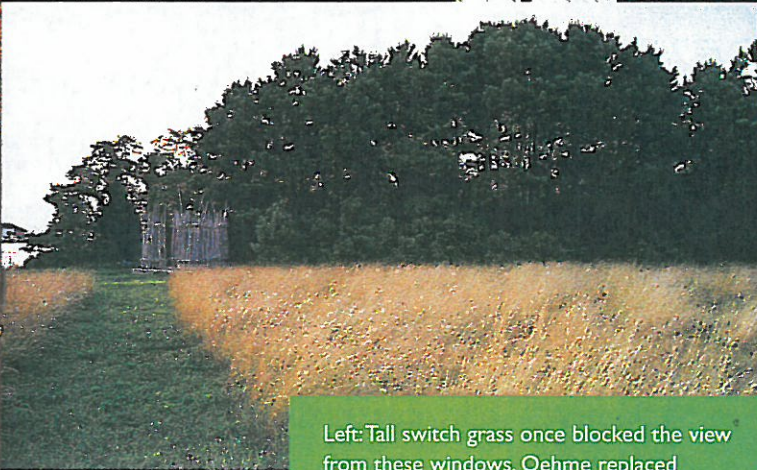
2002, enjoying a barbecue on the deck. “Jim designed my garden in Connecticut 10 years ago, and it’s interesting to see how his design approach has distilled since then.

The palette is more streamlined and minimal, much like a Rothko painting, where my garden is more impressionist in style. I think this simplicity really works with this particular site.” SEEN: Painter Forrest Moses, November 2002, photographing the pond. “I have partially based my painting *Bali Pond* on Jim’s pond because the plantings are so naturalistic, and the light there is so interesting. The trees make beautiful reflections on the water, too.” SEEN: Writer James Grayson Trulove, May 2004, at a company picnic. “There were a lot of people walking through and around the garden. I think it’s the most successful part of the garden because the meadow so seamlessly connects the house and the bay and feels like it’s always been there.”



*“My fantasy has always been to have
a house that floated over a meadow”*





Left: Tall switch grass once blocked the view from these windows. Oehme replaced it with *Pycnanthemum muticum*, a low-growing, mint-scented perennial. The walkway wraps the perimeter of the house. Above: Frames and focal points, architectural and natural, bring focus to the repetition that defines a modern yet naturalistic garden.

Asian wild rice (*Zizania latifolia*), wild oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) and generous numbers of broom sedge (*Andropogon virginicus*). Van Sweden has interplanted to soften the squares of giant black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia maxima*) and aromatic aster (*Aster oblongi-*

folius 'October Skies'), "so you get the feeling that things have seeded around, more like a meadow," he says. 'Love Parade' yarrow, blue false indigo and the Western native, daisylike *Erigeron glaucus*, have all been added.

"People have the idea that meadows are straightforward and self-sustaining, but that isn't really the case. They do require a lot of planning and experimenting," van Sweden says. "I've learned a lot from this garden, even though I've done many meadows before. Each one presents its own set of challenges."

Soon after the initial planting, he found that he couldn't see the bay through



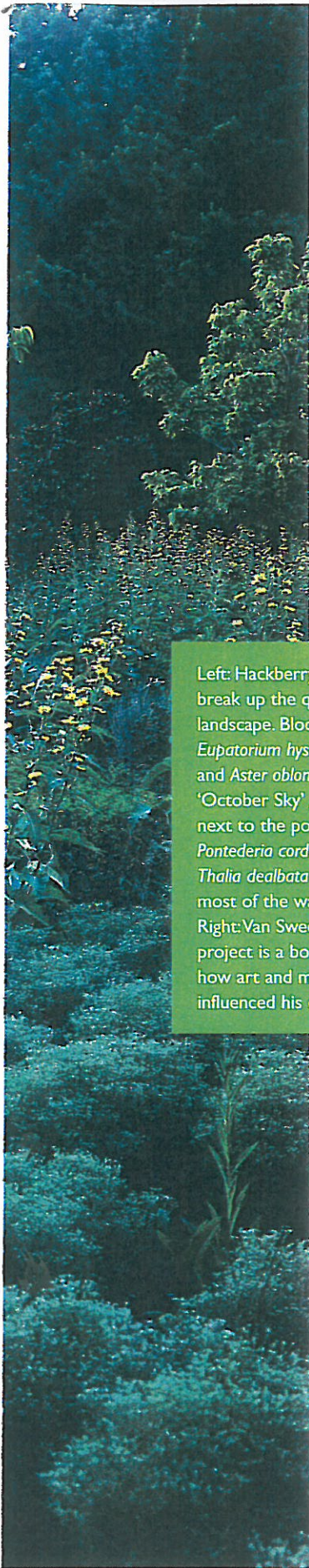
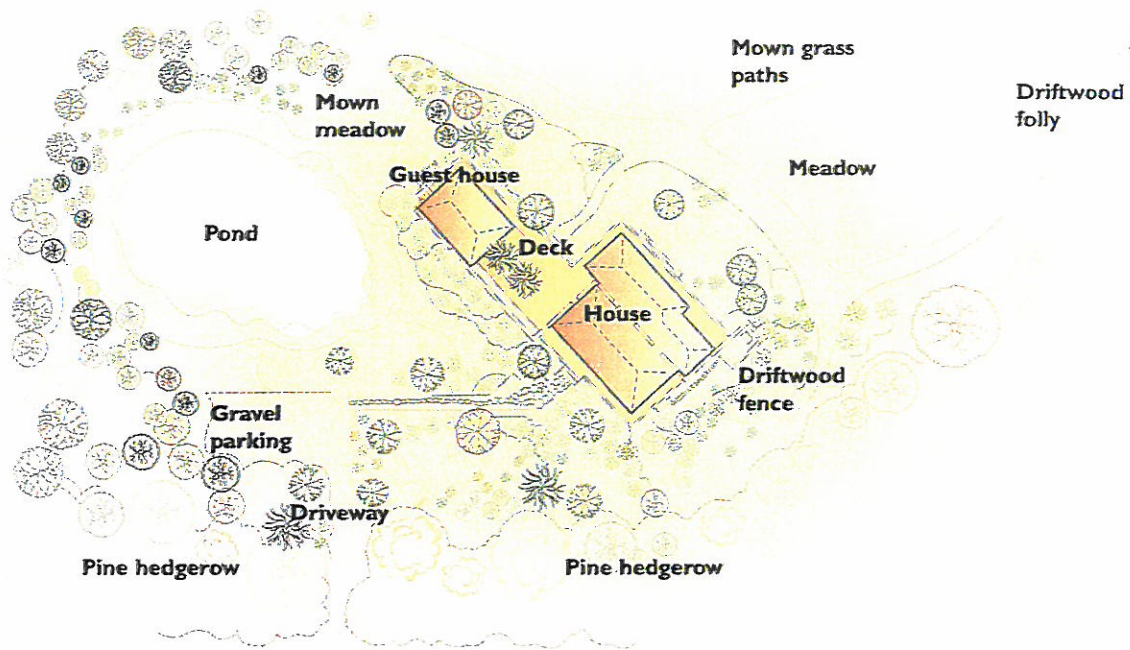


ILLUSTRATION BRENDA WEAVER

Left: Hackberry trees break up the quiltlike landscape. Blocks of *Eupatorium hyssopifolium* and *Aster oblongifolius* 'October Sky' grow next to the pond, where *Pontederia cordata* and *Thalia dealbata* cover most of the water. Right: Van Sweden's next project is a book on how art and music have influenced his design.



his living room windows—the very view the substantial glass plane was intended to capture. A row of *Panicum virgatum* 'Cloud Nine' planted by business partner Wolfgang Oehme had quickly shot up to 8 feet. When pressed, Oehme quipped, "Who wants to sit in a living room anyway?"

They moved the switch grass, but new challenges arose. Some plants turned out to be invasive, like *Silphium perfoliatum*. "It's native, but it takes over. To a point, you have to accept the garden's evolution, but the silphium was too much. I also have a coreopsis, which I may take out. And the cassia, too," says van Sweden. Native persimmons (*Diospyros virginiana*) coming up on their own are more welcome.

Van Sweden's edits also involve the planting of trees close to the house. "I have learned that I am uncomfortable living in a fishbowl," he says of his largely transparent house, designed by his architect friend Suman Sorg. "So I have given myself some privacy on the bay side where otherwise there's only a meadow between me and the water. The shade is needed, too. I'm planting magnolias, bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*), hackberries and one willow oak (*Quercus phellos*) to add layering and soften the relationship between the house and garden. But they don't block the view; they frame it."

Though his firm has come to dominate the American landscape scene, van Sweden isn't a control freak. He didn't even draw a plan for the garden, though he and Oehme did make notes on a sketch "in Wolfgang's inimitable handwriting," just to get a handle on the number of plants they might need.

His garden has come in phases and will continue to evolve. Even as the meadow mimics the Chesapeake's character, the more heavily designed house, pond and formal garden anchor the site. Winding between those elements, the paths, swaying trees, and grass and perennials create a discourse of movement that reinforces a conversation first begun by the bay. ■



Meadowland

Back to (controlled) nature on Maryland's Eastern Shore. BY ALLEN FREEMAN



AMES VAN SWEDEN, FASLA, ENVISIONED a house set back from water and floating above a meadow. This was to be his weekend getaway. What he didn't want was lawns. He considers them unnatural and uninteresting and much too dependent on upkeep, polluting chemicals, and wasteful irrigation.

The house and its landscape began to be more than a vision five years ago when van Sweden, a founding partner in Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in Washington, D.C., located 25 agricultural acres for sale in the hamlet of Sherwood on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The land sloped gradually westward to the edge of the Chesapeake Bay and was bordered on the north by a 50-foot-wide hedgerow of mature loblolly pines, a windbreak planted when the land was still farmed. The acreage was much more than van Sweden needed, so he partnered with friends—Washington architect Suman Sorg and her husband and business partner, Scott Sorg. Suman designed three houses oriented toward the bay, and Oehme, van Sweden & Associates designed the three gardens. Home and Garden Television built and featured one house, now privately owned; the Sorgs own the second and use it as their weekend retreat; and the third is van Sweden's—sparse, rectilinear, and featured in national design journals, *The Washington Post Magazine*, and several books. This is the story of the landscape around van Sweden's famous house.

For his part of the land, van Sweden claimed three acres along the hedgerow and more or less gave Suman Sorg carte blanche for the house. She designed a spare pair of flat-roofed structures—the main house and a smaller guest house—250 feet east of the water's edge. Extending perpendicular to the bay, the hedgerow defines the landscape's northern edge and gives the house a backdrop when viewed from the south. A tall wall of concrete blocks bisects the main house from north to south; it then folds 90 degrees and becomes a portion of the south elevation, bends back 90 degrees toward the south, runs freestanding

© RICHARD FELBER, BOTH



Located on Maryland's Eastern Shore, the weekend house of landscape architect James van Sweden backs up to the Chesapeake Bay, *above*, and is fronted by a man-made pond, *left*.



for 40 feet—the distance between the two structures—and becomes the east facade of the guest house. Sorg calls it van Sweden's garden wall. The interval between the two structures, enclosed on the east side, is a boardwalk deck that extends north–south and is oriented west toward the bay.

Van Sweden picks up the landscape story: “The land was in soybeans. I knew I wanted a meadow, and I wanted in some way to help improve the bay and prove that you can have a wonderful landscape without any lawn and chemicals.” Pesticides and herbicides make their way into the Chesapeake and harm aquatic life, but fertilizers are also potentially harmful. They promote dense growth of aquatic vegetation—algae and plants—that crowds out natural, desirable aquatic life includ-



Wolfgang Oehme, above left, and James van Sweden when the house was new. The hedgerow frames the house from the west, left, and the south, below.

ing grasses, crabs, and oysters. In 1998 the state of Maryland superseded a voluntary farmland nutrient management program with regulations aimed at reducing the amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus, the main culprits in the bay's nutrient overload. Citing “dead zones” in the bay and its tributaries where levels of dissolved oxygen are too low to sustain life, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation lists nutrient pollution as the single largest problem facing the bay.

And so, with advice from his friend Darrel Morrison, FASLA, of the University of Georgia, a specialist in the use of native vegetation and a self-described “big fan of grasslands and meadow,” van Sweden had soil samples taken. After reading the laboratory analysis, he planted soybeans one more



© RICHARD FELBER, LEFT AND RIGHT; COURTESY JAMES VAN SWEDEN, TOP



Ten feet wide, a curving mowed swath, *above*, separates natural and designed meadows. Furniture maker/sculptor Ben Forgey created a folly of branches, *below*, for a platform close to shore.



time, unfertilized, to absorb chemicals remaining in the soil.

"Then," van Sweden continues, "we stopped farming and let whatever would come up come up. The first thing that happened was a sea of horsetail, *Equisetum hyemale*, generally the first succession weed. It's amazing. It grows everywhere, including out of the pavement cracks in Georgetown [Washington, D.C.] near my house. Darrel came up, and we looked at it and decided it looked rather nice. I'm very flexible as far as meadows, and easily pleased." Some less-wanted usual suspects also appeared, including crabgrass and ragweed. They tend to fill in a space in the first year and then quietly go away when plants like broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*) start to take over.

Says Morrison, "I was pleased in the sense that I didn't see a lot of problem plants." There was no Johnson grass, for example, which is very coarse, invasive, and aggressive. (You get rid of Johnson grass, he advises, by digging it out laboriously or spraying an herbicide on each specimen. Otherwise, it will dominate the meadow and preclude plant diversity.)

In August of the year of the horsetail sea, van Sweden had the meadow mowed fairly high, about half a foot, and a variety of grasses and flowers began to appear the following spring. At this point, he defined an area that he calls "the designed garden," which extends in arcs from 50 to 100 feet out from the house and is separated from the meadow by a 10-foot-wide path that keeps the meadow from invading the designed garden; beyond the path, nature takes its course. Van Sweden uses "designed" in a loose sense, however, meaning that a drum seeding drill was employed to plant several varieties of grasses native to the east coast of North America, including *Schizachyrium scoparium*. He also seeded native bloomers, including asters and coreopsis. The meadow, he says, is "a big mix-up of everything" contrasting with the designed garden, which consists of masses of casually seeded plants.

As a prolific writer of books and a partner in an active 23-person practice, van Sweden doesn't do much hands-on

gardening. "I'm not a plants person," he says, instead identifying himself as a landscape architect and an architect who leaves decisions about the uses of natives versus exotics to his professional partner of 29 years, Wolfgang Oehme, FASLA. "We meet in the middle," van Sweden says. For his part, Morrison likes the idea of separating the untended meadowland from the designed garden. He generally endorses creating what might be called linear lawns, which can flow like a river through and between areas of taller vegetation. Such divisions signify design intent, he says, and provide firebreaks during fall and into early spring when grasses go dormant.

Oehme, a landscape architect and horticulturalist, advised van Sweden on the designed garden. "I like focal points of tall plants with a bigger leaf," Oehme says. "You put them in place where people will notice them, walk over to them, and then see something else. You get pulled into the garden. The main point is that you don't see everything at once."

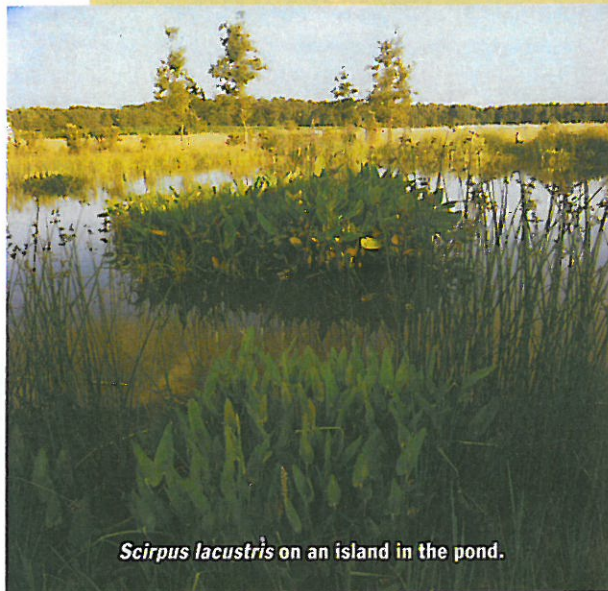
That kind of intimate contact with nature was what van Sweden had in mind for the east side (front) of the main house, where Suman Sorg designed a long screened porch to remind van Sweden of his childhood and the screened porch of his grandmother's cottage on Lake Michigan. A little way out from the house, he had dug an irregular-shaped pond, about 80 feet in diameter. The long view west toward the bay is very fine, but van Sweden knew he wanted cozy scenery as well. "You get tired of a dramatic view if you look at it all the time," he says. "A pond is a way to get close to the water. Also, I wanted water plants, lilies and so on, that you don't get on the bay."

His meadowland experience on the Eastern Shore taught van Sweden that a garden like this requires thought, intervention, and maintenance, especially in the first two years. As Oehme puts it, "You have to be patient with nature." But for van Sweden, the experience has been a great way to engage with his land. Along the way, he says, he learned that you can let nature take its course and start from there. You can emphasize the meadow grasses and other plants you like and remove the ones you

Making Sense on the Bay

WHEN JAMES VAN SWEDEN and Wolfgang Oehme first hung out their shingle in 1975, grass was, in the United States, something to be mowed. The new partnership's use of grasses in the natural, uncut state was revolutionary at that time, and they called their meadow-inspired planting style the "New American Garden."

Certain fundamentals haven't changed. Though the planting may seem casual (appropriately so, in this rural setting), van Sweden's



Scirpus lacustris on an island in the pond.

country garden depends on its effects on a nicely calculated juxtaposition of carefully chosen perennials with select grasses. The steel-blue foliage of little bluestem grass (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) that van Sweden used as the background of this personal meadow, for example, makes an appealingly subtle complement to the blue leaves and richly purple summertime blossoms of *Tradescantia* 'Concord Grape,' and a bold contrast to the yellow spires of wild senna (*Cassia marilandica*).

In the early days, Oehme, van Sweden & Associates relied heavily on European, especially German, grass cultivars. And the perennial flowers van Sweden has assembled around his new house are a mix of natives and exotics. But in the backbone of the planting, the grasses, he has given pride of place to

wild-type North American natives such as the *Schizachyrium*.

In part, this reflects the designer's desire to integrate the garden with its unspoiled rural context. However, it also bespeaks van Sweden's increased sensitivity to the issue of invasive plants. Of the five species of grasses he has woven into the meadow, four are North American natives, and van Sweden points out that the exception, *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster,' a clone of the Eurasian feather reed grass, is sterile.

Grasses, van Sweden emphasizes, simply make sense on this coastal site. The climatic extremes experienced here do not faze them. They waited out the summer-long drought that

followed their initial planting, shooting up undaunted the following spring. Nor did the grasses suffer this past September when Hurricane Isabel drove brackish Chesapeake Bay water 75 feet inland. Just as important, their leaves and stems are unpalatable to deer.

Ease of maintenance makes this meadow-style planting especially suited to a weekend sanctuary, where the emphasis should be on rest and recuperation rather than on field labor. One cutting at winter's end to clear away the old growth and make room for the new is all that is required.

Nevertheless, it is the grasses' aesthetic contribution that is most important to van Sweden. He loves

the seasonal changes, the way the panoramic views of early spring become framed and subdivided as the grasses and their partnered perennials grow with the onset of warmer weather. He admires the way the grasses "dance" rhythmically with the wind and their russet colors in autumn. And there is the personal connection: Cosmopolitan though he may be, van Sweden has never lost touch with his Midwestern childhood. Grasses, icons of the prairie, will always have a special appeal for this native son.

—THOMAS CHRISTOPHER

The writer is a horticulturalist based in Connecticut and the coauthor, with James van Sweden, of Architecture in the Garden (Random House).



Above, pink *Achillea* 'Love Parade' (yarrow) and a background of *Schizachyrium scoparium* along the entrance walk next to the pond. Below, *Rudbeckia maxima*, also next to the entrance walk, clustered nearer the house.



James van Sweden's Meadow

Trees and Shrubs

Acer rubrum
Aesculus parviflora
Alnus glutinosa
Baccharis halimifolia 'White Caps'
Catalpa bignonioides
Celtis laevigata
Celtis occidentalis
Cladrastis lutea
Clerodendrum tomentosum fargesii
Deutzia sp.
Diospyros virginiana
Elaeagnus x ebbingei
Gymnocladus dioica
Halesia vestita
Hydrangea quercifolia
Juniperus virginiana
Liquidambar styraciflua
Maclura pomifera
Magnolia grandiflora
Magnolia virginiana
Magnolia x 'Butterflies'
Myrica cerifera
Philadelphus sp.
Pinus taeda
Rhus chinensis 'September Beauty'
Salix elaeagnos
Sassafras albidum
Sorbaria sorbifolia
Viburnum x pragense
Viburnum prunifolium
Viburnum tomentosum

Perennials

Achillea 'Love Parade'
Aster oblongifolius 'October Skies'
Aster tataricus
Cassia marilandica
Coreopsis tripteris
Datisca cannabina
Eupatorium byssopifolium
Helenium 'Flammenspiel'
Helianthus microcephalus
Inula racemosa 'Sonnenspeer'
Petasites japonicus
Pycnanthemum muticum
Rudbeckia maxima
Silphium perfoliatum
Tradescantia 'Concord Grape'

Grasses

Calamagrostis 'Karl Foerster'
Chasmanthium latifolium
Panicum virgatum 'Cloud Nine'
Schizachyrium scoparium
Scirpus lacustris
Scirpus sylvaticus
Scirpus validus
Tripsacum dactyloides
Zizania latifolia

Water Plants

Nymphaea sp.
Thalia dealbata

Climbers

Aristolochia macrophylla
Fallopia aubertii
Lonicera sempervirens



The view to the bay, framed here by *Magnolia virginiana* and an arc of *Celtis occidentalis* (hackberry), includes a large stand of *Schizachyrium scoparium*.

dislike or let the good specimens crowd out the bad. And you can introduce new varieties as you see fit.

Sitting on his deck with luncheon guests, van Sweden surveys the bay and calls attention to a distant landscape. Typical of perhaps 99 percent of such domestic lots on the Chesapeake, it consists of a house surrounded by mowed lawn extending right down

to the shore. "Think of all the chemicals and water and noise and gasoline that requires," he says. "My landscape is the alternative. Look how wonderful it is."

PROJECT CREDITS Landscape architect: Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, Inc. Architect: Sorg and Associates, P.C.

Landscape Architects

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OEHME, VAN SWEDEN & ASSOCIATES

The new all-American garden.

Over the past 25 years, Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden have stealthily revolutionized the American landscape. “It’s a new way of looking at the garden,” says van Sweden of their naturalistic approach of using mass plantings. “We plant 300 or 3,000 herbaceous perennials and create the effect of meadows with big sweeping vistas.” And even though Washington, D.C.-based Oehme, van Sweden & Associates does not limit itself to indigenous plants, the company has been at the forefront of the trend toward ornamental grasses.

Since 1977, the partners have put their backgrounds in horticulture and landscape architecture (Oehme) and architecture and city planning (van Sweden) to use on a mix of small- and large-scale projects. Their public commissions include the gardens at the Federal Reserve building and Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., the Chicago Botanic Garden, and the Red Butte Arboretum in Salt Lake City. “If the clients are smart, they will bring us in before the architect,” says van Sweden. “We like to design from the windowsill out—the main driveway, the service entrance, the

pathways, the walls, the pool, even the lighting. We want to do it all.”

The scale of the projects may vary, but each has some common denominators: Every project is low maintenance, uses no chemicals, requires only minimal watering, and acknowledges the passage of seasons. The firm has done more than 100 gardens in Georgetown alone, and in the process it is changing the way people think of winter gardens. “We are getting them away from the evergreen plastic cemetery look and toward a dry bouquet,” van Sweden says. “A winter garden is not a dead garden. It’s a dried garden full of beautiful colors and sculptural forms. It will come back.”



Oehme is a native of Germany. Van Sweden grew up in the Midwest, then studied in Holland, and has traveled extensively in Japan. Their work is a synthesis of Dutch and Japanese design, with a nod to the Prairie Style of Frank Lloyd Wright and the lushness of Brazilian landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx.

In between overseeing the Washington office and watching over some 65 projects simultaneously—current jobs range from handbag designer Judith Leiber's penthouse in New York to an 85-acre estate in Maryland to a Low Country retreat in South Carolina—van Sweden finds time to write books. His fourth tome, *Architecture in the Garden* (Random House), has just been published. In van Sweden's opinion, the books are as important as his firm's landscapes. "Gardens are ephemeral," he says. "The books are our legacy. They will live on long after our gardens are gone." —ADELE CYGELMAN

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