FEATURES

THRESHOLDS OF DREAMS

For years, a limited band of followers has watched the Dutch designer and nurseryman Piet Oudolf treat a seed library as a paint box. Recently, Oudolf's work has grown more public and his work is better known. Alex Ulam looks at the ways Oudolf marshals the changing beauty of plants across large canvases and over multiple seasons. In Houston, Jennifer Zell, ASLA, visits a new commons at Rice University, designed by the Office of James Burnett, and studies its antithetical orderliness in the context of the city's spread-out chaos. And in the recession's wake, internship opportunities have decreased, which makes the start of landscape architecture careers more shaky. Ernest Beck talks to principals and entry-level designers to find out how they're managing an uncertain time.

IMAGE CREDIT
Piet Oudolf
A PLANTSM Ellis
PIET OUDOLF IS OBSESSED WITH PERENNIALS. AS A DESIGNER AND CULTIVATOR, HE IS CHANGING THE DEFINITION OF A GARDEN IN ITS PRIME.
AS WITH GOOD THEATER OR GREAT LITERATURE, PIET OUDOLF DISTILLS HIS PLANT PALETTE INTO A DRAMA THAT OFTEN SEEMS MORE REAL THAN LIFE ITSELF.

There is not much left over from the 12th Annual Venice Architecture Biennale, which ended this past December. The massive Arsenale, a complex that dates from the 12th century and serves as the Biennale’s main exhibition hall, has been emptied of the architectural models and video displays that drew throngs of critics, students, and architecture aficionados from all over the world. However, one notable installation remains in place. At the end of Arsenale is the Giardino delle Vergini, a place where there is still life despite the chilly winter winds blowing in from the nearby canals. Here, along a curvilinear pebbled walkway, the sedums and asters are dormant for the winter season. The Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf planted this 6,000-square-meter plot of land last spring. The perennials here will be in flux, sprouting and dying down, until the next Architecture Biennale in 2012, when Oudolf’s garden will likely be replaced by another landscape installation.

Oudolf’s garden was a big hit at the 2010 Biennale’s opening this past August. It marked only the second time that a major landscape architecture installation was featured in the Venice exposition; the first, by the landscape architecture firm Gustafson Porter, which was commissioned for the 2008 Biennale, was an installation of floating shade cloth suspended by helium balloons. In addition to literally breaking new ground at the Biennale, Oudolf was one of three exhibitors recognized with a special mention at the Biennale’s awards ceremony in August. What was special about Oudolf’s installation for the Biennale judges? According to one judge, Joseph Grima, the editor of the Italian design magazine Domus, who introduced Oudolf at a panel discussion, “One of the interesting things about it is that it could be easily missed.”

Oudolf captures the plant kingdom’s quintessence in a way that no other living horticulturist does, says James Corner, ASLA, the principal of James Corner Field Operations, who hired Oudolf to join the design team for the High Line in New York City. “It seems like a perfect expression of nature and natural processes,” Corner wrote in an e-mail, “and yet at the same time it is very clearly artistic and intentional in terms of composition, mix, and impression.”

Although many of Oudolf’s gardens operate on a subtle level, they are difficult to miss these days.
They are being built as the centerpieces of high-profile projects in Europe and in the United States. In Chicago, in conjunction with Gustafson Guthrie Nichol Ltd. and Robert Israel, he designed the Lurie Garden at Millennium Park. In New York City, he designed the Gardens of Remembrance at the Battery (one of New York City’s oldest public spaces) and collaborated with James Corner Field Operations in developing the planting design along the High Line. And together with a coauthor, Noel Kingsley, Oudolf is establishing an enduring influence upon the landscape architecture and horticulture professions with a prolific output of books including Designing with Plants, Planting Design: Gardens in Time and Space, and the forthcoming Landscapes in Landscapes.

Oudolf is one of the founders of the New Wave Planting movement, a school that rebels against formal gardening in favor of an aesthetic that celebrates a plant’s entire life cycle. He values plants for their shape and texture and not just for their flowers, as is the case with many traditional garden designers. To Oudolf, flowers are compelling decorations. However, he says that it is much more important to choose plants based upon their individual attributes and their overall appearance. “The flowering period is so short for many plants, so that if you only chose them for their color, then you are probably using a lot of plants that are not going to work for the way I garden,” he says. “So color is emotion—it is icing on the cake. It is the extra thing that you can create an atmosphere with. What you really need is plants that are going to perform after they have stopped flowering.”

Oudolf, who is 66, is rather informal, both in his work and in his appearance. He is a towering Dutchman...
OU DOLF FAVORITES

1. AMSONIA HUBRICHII
2. STACHYS 'HUMMELD
3. SEDUM 'SUNKISSED
4. SEDUM 'MATRONA
5. ROGERSIA 'DIE ANMUTGE' AND BRIZA MEDIA
6. ARUNCUS 'HORATIO'
NEW DISCOVERIES

1 EUPATORIUM 'SNOWBALL'
2 PHLOMIS TUBEROEA COMPACT FORM
with a mop of white hair and a ready but quiet laugh. On most occasions, he looks as though he is ready to stop whatever else he is doing at the moment, walk right into a garden, and get down on his knees and start planting.

He has always been a renegade. After working in his parents' restaurant until age 26, he attended school to obtain a contracting degree in landscape design. He started his design practice in 1976 in the Dutch town of Haarlem. He was especially interested in learning about how plants grow, and in the early days of his career he hung around with botanists and ecologists more than he did with gardeners.

A driving force in his artistic development was his frustration with the limited plant palette and the dogma that were characteristic of European horticulture in the 1970s. And in order to find plants with what he terms "good character" (i.e., longer flowering periods, more interesting seed head and skeletons), he began to travel to specialized nurseries and gardens throughout Europe. At Alan Bloom's renowned Dell Garden in Bressingham, England, a multiseason perennial extravaganza that features thousands of species, Oudolf learned about plants such as summer asters, Helianthus, and Kniphofia. He also made frequent pilgrimages to the Beth Chatto Gardens in Essex, a place he describes as a "Valhalla" for "plants people" during the 1970s and 1980s. That series of gardens was planted by the British plantswoman Beth Chatto, who became renowned for her research into finding the optimal plants for different kinds of harsh environments.

Although Oudolf greatly expanded his repertoire during those years, he didn't find direct inspiration in many of the gardens that he visited. "The gardens were beautiful, but I was looking for something different with more spontaneity," he says. "It was like looking at antiques: You like them, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you want them."

In 1982, Oudolf and his family moved to a farmhouse outside the Dutch village of Hummelo to establish a nursery for the various seedlings that he and his wife Anja brought back from his travels. He also introduced new cultivars such as Salvia verticillata and hybrids such as a variety of Monarda known as "Oudolf's Charm." Rather than breeding a plant for the size of its petals or its dramatic flowers, he bred plants to have qualities similar to ones found in nature. Soon Oudolf's farm became a destination for gardeners who came from all over Europe in search of special plants. "I was always known as a nurseryman who designed gardens," he says of those early days. "But effectively I was a designer who had a nursery, and now it is more design that has taken over." (Oudolf and his wife closed the nursery earlier this year.)

Many of the plants he uses in the public gardens are still not typical fare for Western horticulture. Some are species that Oudolf discovered in his travels to places like Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, many others are commonly found in nature but have been overlooked by horticulturists because they do not fit with conventional notions of beauty.

At the Biennale this past August, plants with umbrella-shaped heads composed of many small flowers, such as yarrow and joe-pye weed, which are typically found along the North American roadside, were among the primary plants Oudolf used in the Giardino delle Vergini. Interspersed among the perennials was a tall, purplish, spiny grass with long, flat, hairy leaves called Mönch caeruleus, purple muoorgass. At first glance this place looked like a wild meadow. However, after more careful observation, I was struck by the rhythm and balance among the many textures and colors. Nature certainly could not have established such a harmonious order. As the famous Dutch gardener Henk Gerritsen remarked in regard to Oudolf's work: "The plants look wild. The gardens do not."
"COLOR IS EMOTION—IT IS ICING ON THE CAKE," OUDOLF SAYS. BUT "WHAT YOU REALLY NEED ARE PLANTS THAT ARE GOING TO PERFORM AFTER THEY HAVE STOPPED FLOWERING."
1 OFFICE GARDEN
This garden can be seen from Udolf’s office at his farmhouse.

2 ECHINACEA
In the front garden of his house Udolf uses a variety of Echinaceas such as Duschampsia cespitosa and Verbena hastata.

3 CALAMAGROSTIS ‘KARL FOERSTER’
AND RHUS TYPHINA

4 ANEMONE RIVULARIS
Oudolf has very detailed plans for plant placement within his gardens. Instead of a simple linear hierarchy of heights and colors, he approaches gardens the way that a composer might arrange a piece of music with repeating motifs that vary in size and scale. Oudolf puts his plants into a matrix into which he plugs bigger groups of plants, which are punctuated by smaller individual ones of different heights and colors. And he creates a sense of rhythm within his design by repeating different groupings of plants but varying their scale. During the design process, he considers how the garden will look at different times of the year. He says he designs in four dimensions—the fourth, of course, being time.

James Corner says that to get the full impact, one has to view Oudolf’s gardens on multiple occasions. “They play lyrically with time, season, and change,” he writes. “While they may photograph beautifully, this is nothing compared to the more tactile and ambulant experience accrued through multiple visits, each stroll unfolding different impressions, moods, and experiences.”

In Oudolf’s approach, the type of gardening that most people do is called into question. For example, his gardens typically require less than half the maintenance that a typical rose garden needs. He says that people who take care of his gardens, besides possessing technical skills, need to be motivated and passionate about what they do. That is not to say that Oudolf has absolute standards. “If you don’t like it, you can cut it back, because it is your garden,” he generally says to his customers. However, he adds, “Something that is out of flower often is still looking pretty good. Even if it is dead and falling over, it can be pretty nice—for example, when the buds are frozen.”

Oudolf draws a distinction between his approach and that of the Deep Ecology Movement, which is espoused by the activist group Earth First! and the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. These absolutists hold that humans have no right to reorder nature. By contrast, Oudolf sees his work as being inspired by nature, not as re-creating it. In Planting Design: Gardens in Time and Space, Oudolf and Kingsbury write: “Much of what we do is only partly naturalistic and sometimes not very ecological—but these two concepts always inform our work to a greater or lesser degree.... We see them as being part of a continuum, a continuum which also includes the vision of the human artistic imagination.”

Oudolf’s landscapes operate on a much deeper and more complex level than does the traditional big, lush flower garden or the opposite extreme, a garden planted only with indigenous plantings. Instead, as with a good theater production or a work of great literature, Oudolf distills his plant palette into a drama that often seems more real than life itself. And his aesthetic is especially powerful in this age of rapid urbanization and environmental degradation because it reminds us of something that is fast disappearing—nature.

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