



# hamptons HAVEN

A bountiful, four-season Oehme, van Sweden garden on Long Island breathes new life into an 18th-century farmstead

STORY BY JENNY ANDREWS ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON DEWEY



To honor the vernacular of field and forest at this location near East Hampton, Eric Groot of Oehme, van Sweden used generous swaths of grasses like *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, and low-maintenance perennials such as *Rudbeckia nitida* 'Herbstsonne' (opposite). A farmhouse in its previous life, parts of the home date back to 1770.





**Opposite:** While the garden is conducive to quiet contemplation, it is also designed as a place for entertaining friends and family. Here two of the homeowner's children prepare the table for an outdoor fete. **Below:** The dinner party, which includes Groft (in blue) and his client (in yellow), also feasts other senses amidst a lush circle of *Agastache*, *Hakonechloa*, *Chasmanthium* and *Tricyrtis*. **Left:** A cozy nook under a grape arbor, made from recycled locust trees, bark still intact.



**a**n ugly frame does grave injustice to a work of art. And an overgrown, unwelcoming garden is no fitting frame for a home, especially one with the character of Annachiara Danieli's cedar-shake, Hamptons-vernacular farmhouse, the oldest parts of which date back to 1770. For Danieli, the garden was even more salient than the house (as she says, "I prefer to buy a plant than a chair"), which is why she put her trust in landscape architecture firm Oehme, van Sweden & Associates to respect the past while bringing the site gracefully into the 21st century.

A champion of sustainable swaths of grasses and perennials — an elegant stylization of meadow and woodland — Washington, D.C.-based Oehme, van Sweden has become well known over the course of its 33-year history for lending sophistication to naturalized plantings. And for this classic OvS project, principal Eric Groft brought a painterly touch to the tenets of less lawn, four seasons of interest and environmental sensitivity. As he says, "We start by addressing sustainability and the client's needs, then focus on the aesthetics."

When he began work on the nearly two-acre Danieli property in 2007, the front yard consisted of an in-your-face driveway and a broken-down brick sidewalk lined with suffering lavender and overgrown cedars. In the backyard, an off-kilter 1970s kidney-shaped pool (which Danieli refers to as a "bathtub") and pool house were overwhelmed by out-of-bounds shrubs and trees. As Danieli recounts: "Before, the garden was like a jungle, everything was closed. Eric understood it had to be opened up. I wanted something very natural."

One of Groft's first considerations was to create a smooth segue between the property and the surrounding rural landscape of fields and woods, pointing out, "There's no replacement for appropriateness to site." A significant plus for Danieli when she bought the house was a scenic easement and protected marshland just across the road, with a view beyond to Accabonac Harbor. As Danieli describes the setting: "It's calm and quiet, and the light is beautiful."





To separate the house and its surrounds from the back third of the property and the swimming pool, Groft stretched a long, low, see-through fence that is less about boundary-making than beckoning exploration beyond. It also supports plantings of blackberries and raspberries.



Springs Fireplace Road, where fires once alerted local residents that ship supplies were ready for pick up, is adjacent to the front yard. Groft wanted to screen out the road's traffic without blocking the borrowed landscape. The ideal solution was an OvS signature: ornamental grasses. Says Groft, "The grasses were perfect — they're denser on the bottom to hide the road, but you can see through the tops, which draws your eye up to the water and sky." They're also disliked by the ever-present deer population.

Another main goal was to unify the property within its boundaries, beginning with "traffic flow" and one of Groft's pet peeves, "suppressing the impact of the car," while also "maximizing the pedestrian experience." For this Groft moved the garage farther from the house and disguised it with an arbor that hosts a "veil of vines." A new primary path — made of rustic stepping stones interplanted with thyme and Irish moss — from the driveway to the front door ends at a porch ample enough to greet guests or relax on a bench, but not so large that it alters the façade of the house.

But a stroll doesn't have to stop at the porch. A grape-arbor focal point pulls visitors along a ribbon of lawn that continues to wrap around the house, arriving at terraces in the back and emptying into a greensward shaded by the wide-spreading branches of an old elm. Whenever possible Groft left mature trees like this in place to serve as anchors and to make the landscape



## DESIGNER PROFILE: ERIC GROFT



Coming to Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in 1986, with a master's in landscape architecture from the University of Virginia, **Eric Groft was the first associate to join the firm**, founded in 1977 by Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden. Drawn by the OvS reputation not only for residential-garden design but also for horticulture, says Groft, "At UVA they didn't teach us what a perennial was, and when I saw Wolfgang's work around Baltimore, I was on a quest to learn more." Groft also holds a bachelor's degree in geography and environmental science from Shippensburg University, which continues to influence him, with the vernacular of each site front and center in his creative process. "I like to say 'know your site' and listen to what the location, neighborhood and region tell you. I make sure everyone in the office knows what watershed we are working in to heighten their environmental awareness." Having worked on so many projects he admits to losing count, Groft considers himself a jack-of-all-trades, enjoying all phases of the process, from the first site meeting to the last plant going into the ground, and even to consulting on ongoing maintenance. His advice to anyone entering the field: "**Landscape architects need to get out of the studio and see things** — gardens, buildings, cities, national parks — and most important, have fun. If we aren't having fun, we shouldn't be doing it."



The 60-foot pool is lined with dark tiles to amp up reflections and its wide steps invite poolside confabs. By surrounding it with graceful grasses and perennials that creep over the coping, Groft gave it an unobtrusive, pond-in-a-meadow feel. Opposite: At the far corner of the lot, the revamped poolhouse is screened by Joe-Pye weed and mountain mint.





**Opposite:** Groft and homeowner Anna Danieli were sympatico in their goals for the landscape — simple, natural and appropriate to the site. Groft even made use of glacial boulders unearthed during construction, placing them as features in the garden and creating a circle for conversation around the firepit (in foreground).

the property aesthetically, but Groft made it scrimlike to allow a view through. Though initially Danieli resisted the notion of a swimming pool, her children insisted and now she's glad to have it. One reason being Groft's design — which includes wide steps for people to sit and talk with their feet in the water, dark tiles to enhance reflections, and embracing plantings that give the 60-foot pool a pond-in-a-meadow feel.

Tucked away in the far corner the revised pool house, now a guesthouse, repeats the gray siding of the home and serves almost as a folly. A mow-what-grows path loops past it, separating a dense meadow of *Pycnanthemum muticum*, *Baptisia australis*, *Euphorbia palustris*, *Eupatorium purpureum* ssp. *maculatum* 'Gateway', *Rudbeckia nitida* 'Herbstsonne' and grasses from a hand-sown Eastern Long Island seed mix that merges seamlessly into a neighboring paddock.

A long arbor "nails down the pool," as Groft says, and provides a sense of entry, its rusticity bridging the centuries. Though planted with a variety of vines and meant for shade, the structure is "high and light, rather than low and dark." Sited to face west, it's the ideal spot to lazily let the afternoon slip by, the setting sun giving grassy seedheads a fiery glow. A nearby fire pit, ringed with glacial boulders unearthed on site, can take convivial conversation and star gazing far into the evening. Says Danieli of the finished product, "The garden is simple, but you can see the vision and the design. Before I never went into the garden; now I am part of it." 🍷

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## OEHME, VAN SWEDEN'S LIVING PALETTE

A pre-eminent aspect of the OvS approach to landscape design, dubbed the New American Garden style, is the firm's arsenal of plants. A mix of perennials, ornamental and native grasses, sedges and shrubs, the choices are based on beauty, durability, multiseason interest and ease of care. Herewith is a very small sampling, with commentary by OvS principal Eric Groft.

look more established, also including a flowering dogwood and holly that give definition to the front garden, and black locusts on the north property line that blend into the woods beyond.

Along the route a point-counterpoint of perennials offers waves of varying heights, textures and colors, subtly changing with the seasons, all stitched together by billowy grasses and sedges. These "big layers," as Groft calls them, are designed to be consistent with the scale of the surrounding views, so for plant quantities he eschewed twos and threes in favor of 50, 100 or even 500 of a single species. As Groft points out, this mass approach also "rests the eye and cuts down on maintenance."

The living palette (see sidebar on facing page) is at the core of what Groft calls the "thread of consistency," and the Danieli plant list is essentially a who's who of tried-and-true OvS staples — for perennials, *Agastache*, *Pycnanthemum*, *Senecio*, *Asarum*, *Nepeta* and *Geranium*; for grasses, *Pennisetum*, *Panicum* and *Calamagrostis*. But OvS also continues to test plants for addition to its stable, and newcomers in the Danieli landscape include *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', *Tricyrtis japonica* and *Carex muskingumensis*.

Nestled amidst this mix of green, gold and purple is the dining patio behind the house, close enough to the kitchen for easy access, but far enough to be its own outdoor room. While Danieli loves her time alone in the garden, she also enjoys entertaining, and during the summer, family and friends gather there often. A native of Udine, Italy, Danieli brings home-country traditions to the table and insisted that Groft include edibles in the garden — figs, rhubarb, tomatoes, asparagus and basil. But rather than create a separate vegetable plot, Groft incorporated fruits and vegetables into the garden.

For example, blackberries and raspberries found a home on a long fence separating the house environs from the pool area. Though a safety requirement, the fence was also used to break up



### FOUNTAIN GRASS

Named for its graceful clumps of narrow foliage and nodding bottlebrush-like flowers, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* is "a true four-season grass that brings the feeling of the waterfront right into the garden. It catches the wind and nods its foxtail flowerheads into pools seemingly for a drink."



### MOUNTAIN FLEECE

Adding a "nice red spark" to the garden from July through October, *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail' forms a bushy mound of handsome foliage with distinctive markings, topped by brightly colored "tails" of tiny crimson flowers.



### ANISE HYSOP

A long bloomer, from midsummer through September, 2- to 3-foot *Agastache* 'Black Adder' "has the always-pleasant lavender-purple color that goes so well 'out East.'" A magnet for butterflies and other nectar-seeking insects, the foliage and flowers also have a minty fragrance when brushed against.



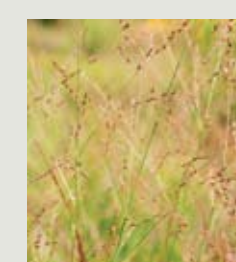
### MOUNTAIN MINT

Producing thick clumps of stems from underground stolons, *Pycnanthemum muticum* "creates a massed volume in the garden, and its silver-gray foliage and almost-white flowers contrast with the grasses." A tough plant, it takes to wet or dry conditions, sun to part shade.



### SWEET AUTUMN CLEMATIS

With its ample sprays of small, fragrant white blossoms and lustrous dark-green foliage, *Clematis terniflora* (also called virgin's bower) is "a beautiful cascading vine that grows fast and blooms in August when all the Hamptonites are in their gardens." If it gets out of bounds, it can take a hard pruning and will easily rebound.



### SWITCHGRASS

A cultivar of a native switchgrass that is perfect for wet conditions and full sun, *Panicum virgatum* 'Warrior' has airy heads of reddish flowers in late summer and is relatively short for switchgrass — less than 4 feet tall. It makes an ideal see-through plant for screening without