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GARDENING

Grass Act | Swaths of *Pennisetum* line a boardwalk path toward the beach on a project near Georgica Pond. See Resources.



The Firm

THE VENERABLE OEHME, VAN SWEDEN LEADS THE WAY INTO GARDENING'S FUTURE *by Alejandro Saralegui*

Q&A with landscape architect Eric Groft, principal of Oehme, van Sweden

Having been at Oehme, van Sweden for 25 years, you have a unique view of American landscaping. How has gardening progressed over that time?

Eric Groft: America's love of gardens is still growing. You see it in the nursery business and also at our firm, despite the recent

economic slowdown. Ten to 15 years ago, gardening was the country's fastest-growing hobby. People started spending more time in the garden and seeing how enjoyable it is. We even have a client who decided not to tear down a ranchburger and build something bigger; instead, he hired us to find the true bones of the garden and turned the existing house into more of a garden pavilion. Now you don't even see where the house is.

How is the firm evolving?

EG: We're certainly making some necessary changes as our founders, Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden, step aside. The new principals, Sheila Brady, Lisa Delplace and me, are nurturing new talent within the firm, and we are focusing on cutting-edge plants, finding new species to replace the old OVS palette. Sustainability is also at the forefront of our thinking, not just with plants, but with hardscapes.

RICHARD FELBER/COURTESY OF OEHME, VAN SWEDEN



Oehme, van Sweden designed the grounds at the Americana Manhasset luxury shopping center. What was your goal there?

EG: Frank Castagna, the owner, is a true visionary and remains so in his 80s. He and I were just talking about what to do in 2014—and we started the landscaping there 30 or so years ago! We have to reinvent the planting to keep it looking dazzling, especially considering what Peter Marino did with the architecture. The place is known for its fashion forwardness, and we get calls from people saying they want their gardens to look just like the Americana!

People think you're the go-to guys for grasses and meadows—the natural look. What else are you known for?

EG: I always try to emphasize the hardscape. When people walk into our garden spaces, they are blown away by the color, texture and fragrance at first, but as they view it through the seasons, they see what is underneath. Jim and Wolfgang developed a dialogue between plantsmanship and architecture that hadn't really been seen for most of the 20th century.

Oehme, van Sweden is known for doing wonderful, bold sweeps of plants on large properties. What about smaller properties?

EG: You need to show restraint. Even on a large property, restraint translates to good taste. If you have too many materials, you have too many materials! On any property it's important to keep it simple and also focus on knowing where you are. If you're in Southampton, then you have to remember that you are not in South Beach.



What do you think gardens in the Hamptons are lacking?

EG: The Hamptons are so rich in terms of gardening that I don't really see the need for anything more, although our microclimate and global warming have allowed for an extended plant palette. But the sense of appropriateness that lets you know you are in the Hamptons is important.

Border Patrol | (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) *Nepeta* softens the contours of an angular pool. Two variations on hardscaping at a garden in the Springs. A field of grasses meets a stone wall, keeping a perennial bed in check. See *Resources*.

What's high on your list of new favorite plants?

EG: *Tetrapanax*, the rice paper plant. It's a great shrub. *Edgeworthia* is ideal for the connoisseur plantsman: It has a yellow kangaroo-paw flower really early in the spring. *Rbodea japonica* is a great ground cover that we'll be seeing more of, too.

What do you think of lawns?

EG: Proportion is key. Remember that a lawn doesn't have to fill the entire landscape from the curb to the foundation planting. I tell clients: You shouldn't have any more lawn than you can mow yourself with a push mower on the hottest day of August.