



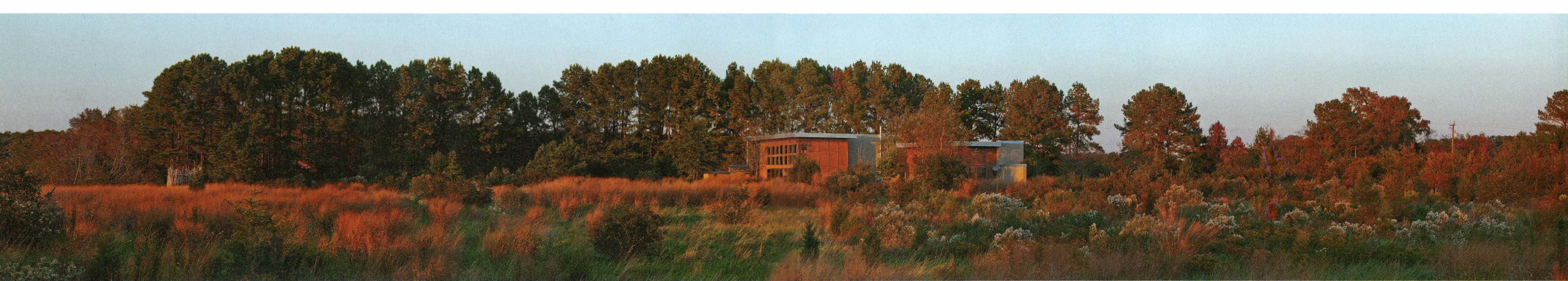
LIFE CHANGES

AS JAMES VAN SWEDEN'S MOBILITY HAS DECREASED, HIS GARDEN HAS EVOLVED.

BY DANIEL JOST, ASLA / PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER FOLEY, AFFILIATE ASLA



To provide a smoother walking surface, van Sweden replaced the irregular bluestone stepping-stones leading to the front door (inset) with a path fully paved in bluestone.



Back in 1999, when James van Sweden, FASLA, began planning his weekend retreat on Maryland's Eastern Shore, his primary concerns were artistic and ecological. He knew he didn't want a lawn. "Think of all the chemicals and water and noise and gasoline that requires," he told *LAM* in 2004. Van Sweden was also taken by the horizontal lines of the Eastern Shore landscape, which reminded him of the Netherlands, where he spent some formative years.

The landscape he designed, with advice from his longtime business partner, Wolfgang Oehme, FASLA, and his friend Darrel Morrison, FASLA, had few strong verticals. It was part naturalistic meadow and part patchwork quilt of meadow plants—the New American Garden style, for which the firm Oehme, van Sweden Landscape Architects (OvS) has long been known. One particularly striking photo from that period shows the deck behind the house, where you can watch the sun set over the Chesapeake Bay. Long horizontal stairs run along the deck, framing a massing of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*). These stairs were open, without any railings. So were the stairs leading to the front door. Van Sweden's garden, after all, was private. Why would he need railings if he didn't want them?

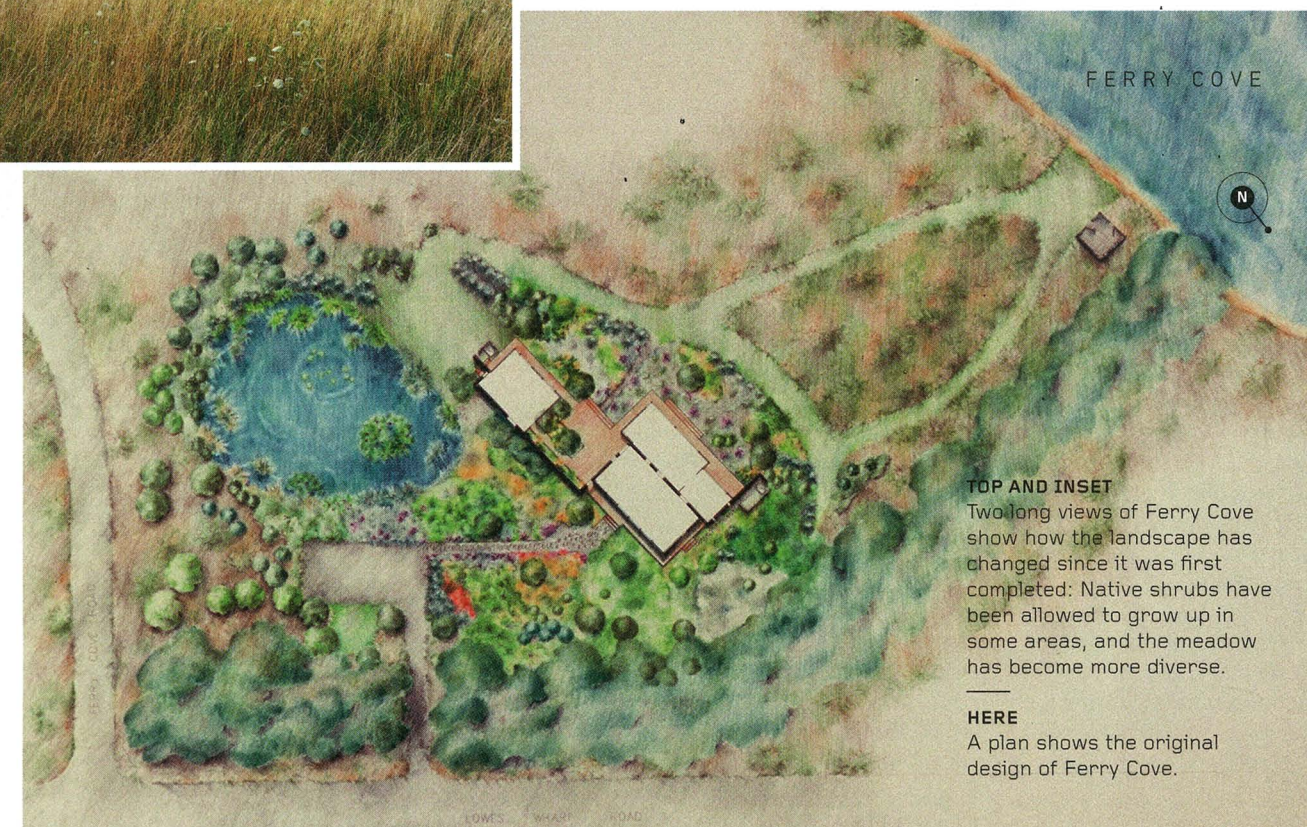
But about four years after the property was featured in *LAM* (see "Meadowland," January 2004), van Sweden began to have health problems. He was eventually diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. As the disease has progressed, his mobility has become more limited, as has his ability to speak. And the changes in his life have led to a number of changes in his garden, which he calls Ferry Cove.

Ferry Cove is situated in the tiny hamlet of Sherwood, Maryland, about two hours east of Washington, D.C., where van Sweden's namesake firm is based. It is barely visible from the street, sheltered by a variety of trees and shrubs. I turn into the driveway on a crisp fall afternoon and see the first sign that this is an OvS garden: On both sides of the drive are swaths



"[VAN SWEDEN] WOULD OFTEN SAY, 'THAT'S A WEED, BUT IT'S BEAUTIFUL. SO IT STAYS.'"

—ERIC GROFT, ASLA



TOP AND INSET

Two long views of Ferry Cove show how the landscape has changed since it was first completed: Native shrubs have been allowed to grow up in some areas, and the meadow has become more diverse.

HERE

A plan shows the original design of Ferry Cove.

COURTESY OEHME, VAN SWEDEN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS. PLAN



of inland sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), one of the few ornamental grasses that can tolerate partial shade. The firm's work with ornamental grasses is legendary.

I park on a pervious pad of crushed stone, surrounded by October Skies asters (*Aster oblongifolius* 'October Skies'), Northwind switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind'), and other plants that rise about chest high, and make my way up a bluestone path. The photos of the garden published in 2004 show a pond in front of the house, a broad mirror of open water, but when I visit, the pond is barely visible. I later learn that there is no spring or well that feeds the pond. It is totally dependent on stormwater, and so it tends to become very shallow in the summer, allowing the Manchurian wild rice (*Zizania latifolia*) to take over.

Van Sweden tucked the house against a mature hedgerow of loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*) that already stood on the northern edge of the site. To the west of the house lies the Chesapeake Bay. Many people seem to think that the closer you put your house to the bay, the better your view will be from the house, but Ferry Cove shows that the opposite can be true—the views of the bay are enhanced by the plants in the foreground and middle ground, even when they are not punctuated with vertical elements in a classical way. The two structures that make up the house—van Sweden's own residence and a smaller guest quarters—are unique. Each is only a single level, yet they have two stories' worth of windows—like they're lofts lifted in from the city.

The buildings are connected by a silvery gray cedar deck, raised slightly off the ground, and a concrete block "garden wall." Many of the materi-

als used are relatively inexpensive, but the architect, van Sweden's good friend Suman Sorg, has arranged them in lyrical ways. Particularly impressive is the way she emphasizes the metal flashing at the top of each piece of plywood facing the building, using the flashing as contrasting lines on the elevation.

Furniture, screens, and a folly made of driftwood show van Sweden's sharp sense of humor. The oversized driftwood rocking chairs on his front porch seem like something from *Alice in Wonderland*. And inside the guesthouse, a driftwood bed puts you in the position of Goldilocks, climbing up into Papa Bear's bed. All these features were designed by the sculptor and furniture maker Ben Forgey.

The deck out back includes planted areas with hackberries (*Celtis occidentalis*) and magnolias (*Magnolia*

virginiana) for shade. A mass of *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' runs along a rectangular pool at the edge of the deck. The ornamental grass has soft, fluffy seed heads that blend together to form a cloud, a blurred, painterly line in the landscape. This contrasts with the coarse leaves of the neighboring *Rudbeckia maxima*—a tall, yellow coneflower, which finished blooming in September but continues to hold up its black seed heads, which are particular favorites of goldfinches. The patchwork of individually massed plants near the house is separated from a more naturalistic, diverse meadow by a strip of mowed lawn, but from the house, it all seems to blend together. Many of the native grasses used in the massings have seeded in the meadow.

Although OvS's planting style can hardly be described as precious,

something about the plantings here seems even less precious, less contrived than your typical OvS garden. The plants are less familiar, less horticulturally improved, wilder looking.

The next day, I visit van Sweden at his apartment in Washington, D.C. Eric Groft, ASLA, one of the partners at OvS, meets me in the lobby, and we go up to van Sweden's apartment together. Groft has worked with van Sweden on the design of his garden over the years, and he directed the design of the neighboring property, which belongs to Sorg.

When we arrive at the apartment, Alfie, the home health aide, takes us into the kitchen, where van Sweden is waiting for us in his wheelchair. A fresh bouquet of flowers sits on the kitchen table in front of him.

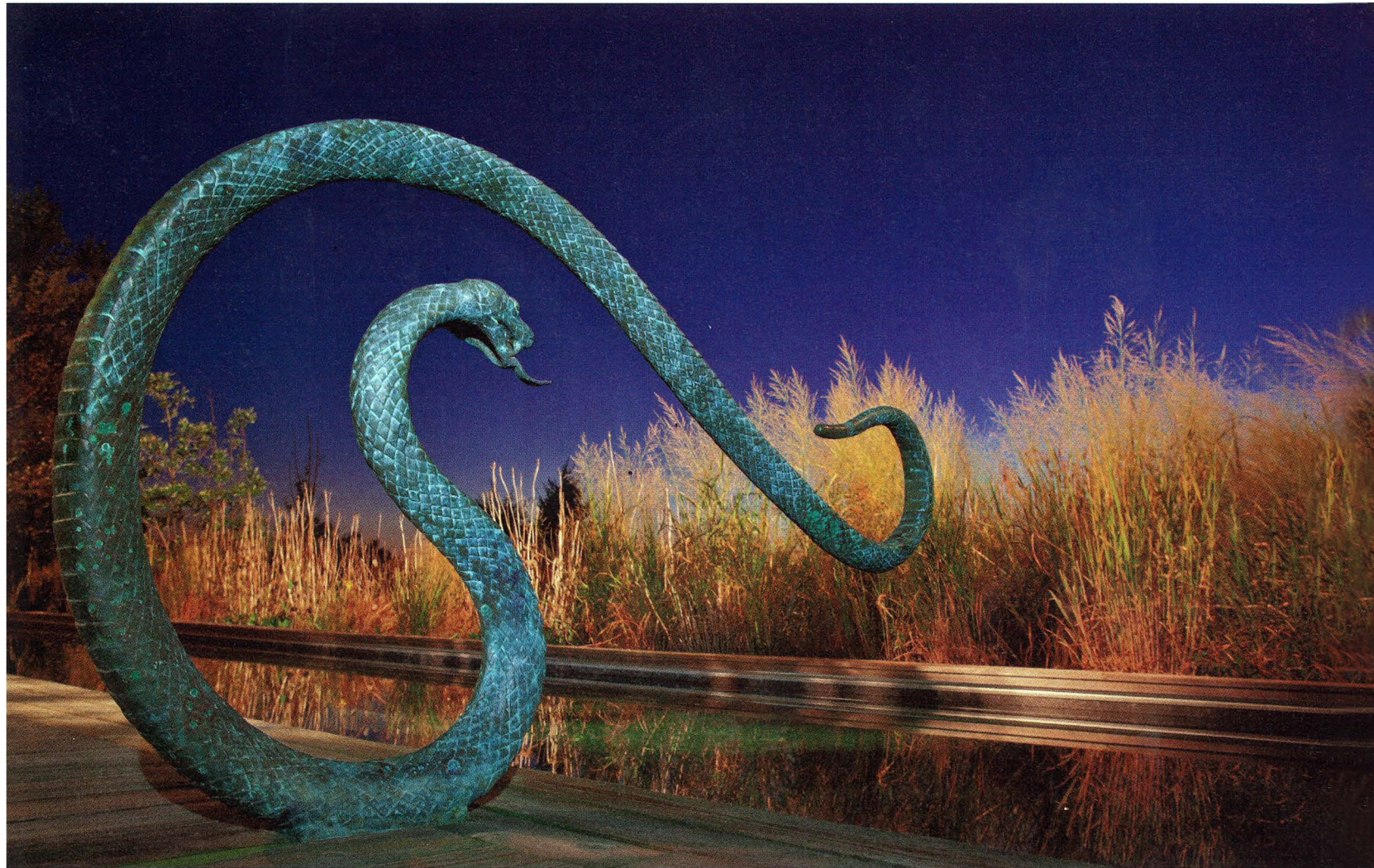
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Today, the pond in front of Ferry Cove is much smaller than it was (inset), especially during the summer and fall, when water levels are low. *Zizania latifolia*, *Iris pseudacorus*, and *Iris versicolor* have colonized its edges (top).

OPPOSITE

A driftwood folly by the artist Ben Forgey sits at the edge of the property, near the shore.





Van Sweden smiles and greets us. I hold out my hand to shake his, but he is unable to lift his arm.

Groft quickly eases the awkward moment. “Dan went to college with John Knowlton,” he says. Knowlton, one of the few people in my class at Cornell who took the elective course in perennials, now works for OvS. Van Sweden is smiling again.

I pull out a copy of van Sweden’s new book, *The Artful Garden*, coauthored

by Tom Christopher, and we look at photographs of his garden and chat about how it has changed over time. “Your garden was published by *Landscape Architecture* in 2004,” I remind van Sweden. “At that time, did you consider it complete?”

“Yes, for the time being,” he says. “Each stage is complete in itself.”

“When did you start changing it?”

“Right away.”

The earliest changes to the garden were often not planned; they were the result of letting nature take hold. Massings of one species began to blend with another. “Especially the *Silphium*,” says Groft. “The compass plant [*Silphium laciniatum*] goes where it likes to go, and it likes it wet.” Sea oats similarly have seeded all over the place. And *Iris pseudacorus* (a yellowflag iris regulated as an invasive in some states) and *Iris versicolor* (a native iris with a blue flower) have completely ringed the pond.



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A pool (top) was integrated into the existing cedar deck (bottom) about four years ago to provide a place for van Sweden to exercise his legs as part of a physical therapy regimen.

OPPOSITE

This snake sculpture by Raymond Kaskey acts as a handle to get in and out of the pool, which is set off by a massing of *Panicum virgatum* ‘Northwind.’

When it comes to plants, “vigorous is better,” says van Sweden. Back when the firm’s New American Garden style was being introduced in the early 1980s, the firm used the catchphrase “tough plants for tough times.”

“Now we need tougher plants for tougher times,” Groft jokes. To get the OvS seal-of approval, a plant needs the ability to stand on its own with little maintenance. “No wimps,” says Groft.

As the garden and the meadow matured, new species that van Sweden hadn’t planted would occasionally show up. That’s how many of the small native shrubs, such as the Eastern baccharis (*Baccharis halimifolia*) growing at the edges of the property, appeared. And that’s how large patches of blackberries and raspberries ended up on the southern portion of the property. “Jim has a great appreciation for weeds,” says Groft. “He

would often say, ‘That’s a weed, but it’s beautiful. So it stays.’”

Van Sweden smiles.

One of the first areas to be changed in response to van Sweden’s illness was the walkway between the parking area and his front door, says Groft. This walkway was originally paved with irregular bluestone stepping-stones, set in a field of broken oyster shells. The bluestones protruded ever so slightly, so at a certain time of day, you’d see a tiny shadow on the white shells below. The path was quite beautiful to look at, but as van Sweden began to have difficulties walking and keeping his balance, each stone became a little obstacle.

So, he replaced the path with one made entirely of smooth, natural cleft bluestone. The stones are cut geometrically and the joints between them are tight. A wooden rail runs alongside the new path.



2003

When van Sweden was still walking, it provided something to hold on to as he made his way to the house. It also provides a mount for lighting along the path, and its horizontal line creates a pleasant asymmetry as you walk toward the house.

Today, the railing continues along the edge of a wooden ramp up to

1 The oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) has a beautiful red fall color.

2 In the foreground planting, pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) is mixed with Tatarian aster (*Aster tataricus*).



3 *Chasmanthium latifolium*, seen in front of the ramp, is one of the few ornamental grasses that can tolerate some shade.

4 A view of the natural meadow shows a small shrub, *Baccharis halimifolia*, sprouting up in front.

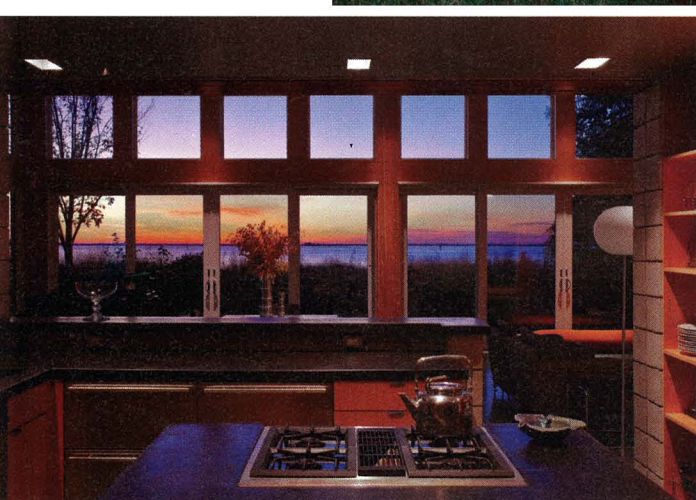
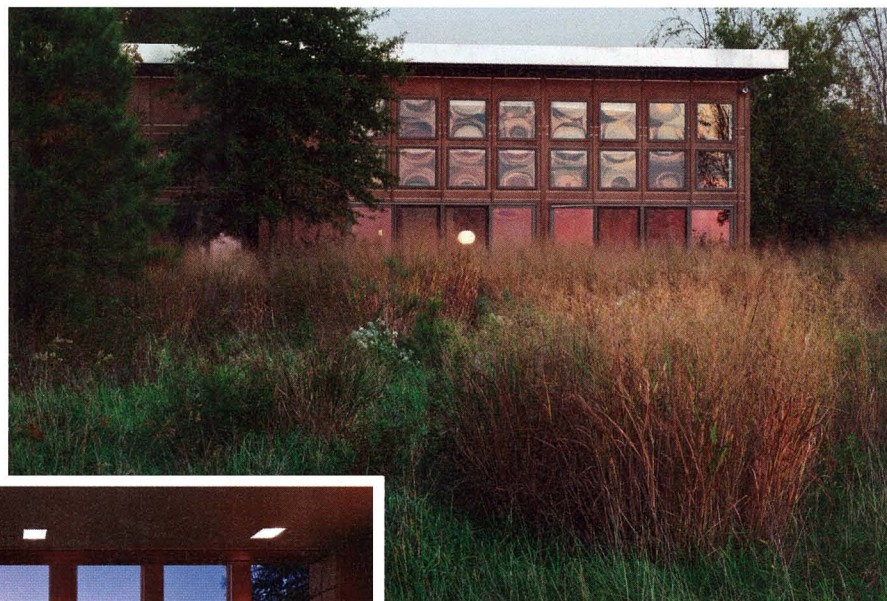
5 A mass of *Rudbeckia maxima* displays dried seedpods in the fall.



WHEN IT COMES TO PLANTS,
“VIGOROUS IS BETTER,”
SAYS VAN SWEDEN.



DANIEL JOST, ASLA, BOTTOM



TOP
The seed heads of *Panicum virgatum* provide a painterly line in the landscape.

BOTTOM
The view from the kitchen includes few vertical elements.

OPPOSITE
The meadow is cut back about once a year to keep woody shrubs like baccharis from establishing a stronghold.

→ the deck that connects the houses. The ramp, which was added when van Sweden began using a wheelchair, is made of the same silvery cedar as the deck. As you move up the ramp, it does not feel like a special, provisional route. There are no switchbacks or uncomfortable turns—it is a clean swoop to the front door.

Whereas the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires railings on both sides of a ramp on public projects, the fact that this was a private residence provided an opportunity to do something slightly different that addressed only van Sweden's specific needs. He would not be walking up the ramp, so there was no need for rails on both sides. Instead, one side of the ramp is open so that there is no obstacle between van Sweden and the plantings to his right as he ascends.

The biggest change to the landscape in recent years is the addition of a pool and a hot tub. Both are carefully integrated into the cedar deck at the back of the house. In the early days of his illness, van Sweden used the pool for physical therapy—to exercise his legs underwater. “It’s very narrow,” says van Sweden of the pool. “I didn’t need width. And it’s all one level.” He just wanted a place he could walk back and forth and do leg lifts, he explains. A stainless steel rail runs across the far side of the pool, providing him something to hang on to. “We call it the ballet barre,” says Groft. Van Sweden, who has taken ballet lessons himself, got the idea from one of his clients, Sara Schupf.

The pool was designed with extra-wide steps—16 inches wide with a nine-inch height between the risers—to help make van Sweden’s descent as easy as possible. Van Sweden real-



ized he would need something he could hold on to in order to pull himself up these steps, but he didn’t want a typical metal railing. His firm had recently collaborated with the sculptor Raymond Kaskey on the World War II Memorial, so van Sweden approached him about designing a special cast bronze rail shaped like a snake. “I love the snake as a symbol,” says van Sweden. “It’s a metaphor for good luck.”

“Particularly in the country,” says Groft. “If you have black snakes on the property, it keeps the rodent population down. We’ve tried to introduce snakes in other water features, and the client didn’t want to have anything to do with it. But with Jim being the client, he got his snake.”

One of the biggest changes for van Sweden does not concern the gar-

den itself but the way he experiences it, which is from a sitting position. “In a way, I see things from a different standpoint,” he says. When you are seated, and relatively stationary, little details and specific views become more important. He says he has a new appreciation for trees as objects in the landscape where you can focus your gaze, and for looking up into them.

Most designers don’t consider accessibility when they are designing residential gardens, and most clients will not ask for their gardens to be accessible. People generally think they’ll be healthy forever. But van Sweden’s story is a reminder for landscape architects that people’s needs can change, often quite quickly. It’s not always possible to make a private garden fully accessible, but little touches such as railings can go

a long way. And when they are carefully planned, they can add aesthetic value rather than taking it away.

“Jim used to not be a railing enthusiast at all,” Groft says.

Van Sweden smiles and signals his agreement.

But “lately, Jim has said, ‘Where’s the railing?’ on all of our projects,” Groft says. “It’s made us more conscious in our decisions.”

“I hated ADA,” says van Sweden.

“But now you have a different feeling about it.”

“Yes,” says van Sweden, grinning widely. ●