

FERRY COVE

Modern living spaces
enveloped by nature.

By Dick Cooper



When internationally-acclaimed landscape architect James van Sweden began building his Eastern Shore retreat a decade ago, he wanted to capture the rustic simplicity of his grandmother's beach cottage on Lake Michigan. It was a rustic summer house with a great water view he says. "When we opened it for the season we would have to sweep out a dune of sand, but I loved it."

Van Sweden's home on Ferry Cove in Sherwood is simplistic. From the road to Lowe's Wharf it looks like a large utility building hidden behind the trees. Unlike the more traditional Chesapeake Bay estates with their colonial pedigrees and baronial presence, van Sweden's home is rough and functional.

It is made of cement block sheathed inside and out with marine-grade plywood. The interior of the one-bedroom house has an open design with a 16-foot-high ceiling. The only room separation in the house is a set of large sliding panels hanging from a track on the ceiling that can close off the bedroom. The focus of the house is a wall of windows and sliding doors that open onto gardens and a pool deck with sweeping vistas across the water to Poplar Island. The outline of the western shore is a gray-green line on the horizon. The west-facing house witnesses some of the best sunsets on the Bay.

Van Sweden's house is one of three on the cove that were designed by award-winning architect Suman Sorg, a long-time friend of van Sweden's. She owns Prairie Wind, the modern home next door. A path through the tall grass connects the two houses. The third house on the cove



Gardens run up to the edge of the one-bedroom main house. Marine-grade plywood siding covers the front of the cement-block house.

“THERE IS A
RIGHT PLANT
FOR THE RIGHT
PLACE” -Eric Groft



The gardens and pond have become wildlife habitat.

is known as Casa de Suenos. It was the HGTV Dream House of 2002. Van Sweden designed the gardens that surround the three houses. With their sharp angles and rugged landscapes, the houses look as if they were beamed down to the shore from someplace in the future.

Van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme, founders of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in Washington, D.C., are known for designing the “New American Garden” style that creates outdoor spaces with a four-season approach to plantings. The path to the beach in front of his home is lined with grasses and plants that offer color and texture throughout the year.

“We used mostly native plants,” van Sweden says. “There are a few exceptions. Chinese witch hazel is not native but I just had to have it.”

Van Sweden says that while the uninterrupted view of the Chesapeake Bay is the highlight of the house, he enjoys the gardens and pond he designed along the home’s entrance at the rear.

“I get as much pleasure from the pond as I do from the bay view,” he says. “I saw some pea hens wander through and it was like being in a Fellini movie.” He says he designs gardens to be self-sustaining and relies on the plants that winter over.

“You can never have too many plants,” he says. “I don’t use fertilizer and I don’t water. They are on their own to survive. I don’t have any lawn.”

Van Sweden has written several gardening books. “The books have been very important,” he says.



Washington, D.C. artist Ray Kaskey, who worked with van Sweden on the World War II Memorial, designed the serpent sculpture serves as the railing from the deck into the swimming pool.

The firm’s gardening credits include numerous public spaces, such as World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., the Chicago Botanic Gardens, Rockefeller Park in New York and hundreds of private gardens across the country. They have been a major influence in the District and New York and Long Island. He was hired by Oprah Winfrey to design a large garden at her Indiana estate. “That got us through the recession of 1990,” he says. “We worked for her for four years.”

Sorg, who runs one of the largest woman-owned architectural firms in the country, also has projects that span the globe, including U.S. embassies and consulates. Her design of van Sweden’s house won an American Institute of Architects Honor Award for Architectural Excellence in 2000.

Van Sweden says he began visiting the Eastern Shore in the mid-1966, spending time at the Robert Morris Inn. He had studied for several years in the Netherlands “and the Eastern Shore is about as close to the Netherlands as you can get. I love the big skies.”

He says that he spent 10 years in a beach house, but decided to move to the Bay because the ocean environment was “too hostile. The house next door lost its roof in a storm and water came under my house.”

Van Sweden, 76, says he “is mostly retired, but I get into to the office regularly.” A recent tour of Talbot County gardens sponsored by the Hillwood Museum and Gardens of Washington, D.C., is led by landscape architect Eric Groft, a principal of Oehme van Sweden. Groft, who has been with Oehme van Sweden for 25 years, says the firm is moving into “its second generation,” as he refers to



Panels on a ceiling track separate the bedroom from the living area in the main house.

his associates, Lisa Delplace and Sheila Brady.

Groft leads the group around Sorg’s home pointing to the distinctive outdoor furniture designed by Ben Forgey Jr., also of the District. Forgey used driftwood found on the beach to make the chairs and benches.

Sorg’s round swimming pool is behind the house so that it doesn’t interrupt the view from the house to the Chesapeake. It too, is surrounded by low-maintenance plants and grasses. Groft leads the group on the trail to van Sweden’s house where the visitors are taken by the sparseness of the house and the spectacular gardens and views. Bushes of wild indigo and clumps of concord grape flowers sprinkle purples and blues among the grasses. Groft says many of the plants keep their color through the winter. “There is a right plant

for the right place,” he says.

When one of the guests voices surprise that there is only one bedroom, Groft points out that the guest house is across the pool deck attached to the main house only by a high garden wall. He says that is the way van Sweden likes it. For his part, van Sweden says he is pleased that that the firm is continuing. “I am very happy with my career. I have had a wonderful time,” he says. “I would like to do it all over again.” **SL**