

NATURAL BEAUTY

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CELIA PEARSON

Drawing inspiration from a sloping property that tumbles down toward the Severn River, landscape architect Eric Groft creates an environment lush with native plants, which feels as if it were a happenstance of nature that developed slowly over time.

- 1 Large slabs of stone form a staircase. 2 Nothing is clipped back, flowers are left to dry in the landscape.
3 Seed pods of the black-eyed Susan. 4 Entry path, formed of bluestone installed in non-linear designs.

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Winding pathways traverse the slopes throughout this densely planted landscape. The property is mostly wooded, so plantings skewed toward varieties that would bloom in the shade.

The rich botanical swathes rolling over the slopes of the home at Round Bay on the Severn River are a benign deception. Though the plantings may look as though they've been there for many years, the landscape design is actually new. To give the site a timeless appearance took a thoughtful and gentle design approach led by renowned design firm, Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, Inc.

"We successfully created an ageless feeling like this was always meant to be," says Eric Groft, a principal and owner of Oehme, van Sweden.

To achieve this look, Groft relied on the design philosophy for which Oehme, van Sweden is known: the new American garden style. "It uses a lot of perennials, grasses and shrubs in large masses," Groft explains. "The reason it is that way is to show off the plants and reduce maintenance. If you block out enough space, whether it's for lambs ear or shrub roses, it crowds out the weeds and creates a bold display in the landscape."

Before the plants could be placed though, the challenges of the site needed to be addressed. The home sits on a severe slope, so drainage was a consideration. Prior to the redesign, the pathways were tucked close to the house and were, to be blunt, uninteresting and difficult to navigate. Instead, Groft articulated winding pathways that traverse the slope and opened the front of the house to a pedestrian-friendly garden. In keeping with the need for the landscape to appear timeless and natural, hardscape was constructed using locally-quarried bluestone laid out in non-linear designs; large stones were installed for soil retention.

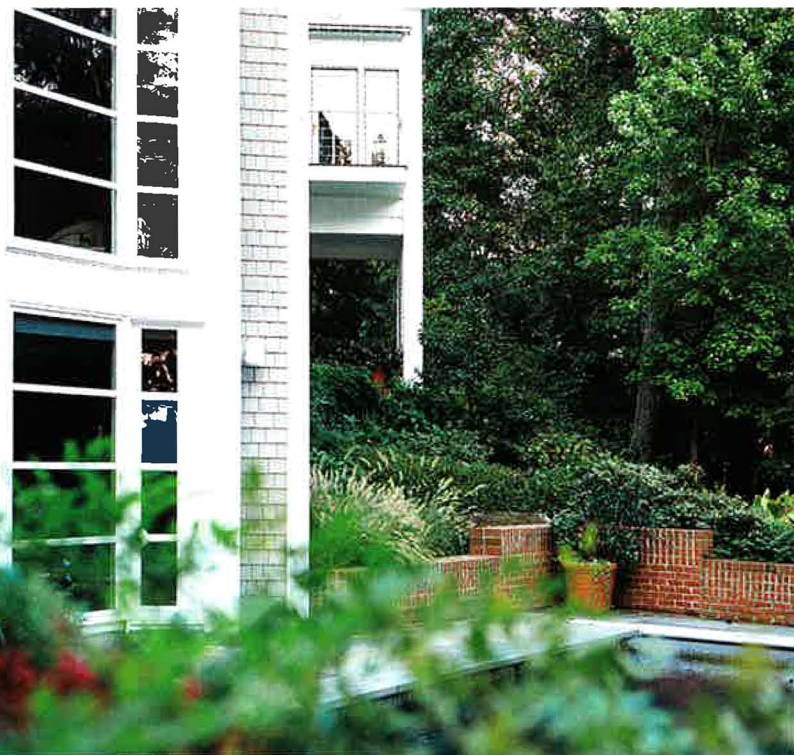
Working on the steep slope was a particular challenge that required the talents of landscape contractors at Rolling Acres Nursery in Brinklow, Maryland. Because of the elevation and location on the water, all the hardscape materials and large trees were craned overtop of the house and into place. "This wasn't for your average guy with a truck," quips Groft. "This took a lot of finesse."

The acreage is primarily wooded, so the plantings skewed toward varieties that flourish in shade including hostas and grasses such as *Carex* (sedge) and *Panicum virgatum* (switch grass), co-planted with native plants black-eyed Susan and sedum 'Autumn Joy' among others. Drifts of color appear in large plantings of *Persicaria 'Firetail'*, coreopsis, and astilbe.

"They didn't come to us with a directive to use this or that, but the word lush was used a lot," he explains. "We not only gave



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The rear of the house opens to a narrow swimming pool, accented by a low brick wall, perched high above the banks of the Severn River.

them a lot of color, but texture as well.”

One example of this partnership between color and texture can be seen in Groft’s management of a drainage swale that he planted with Mazus reptans (often used between paving stones) and framed with red ‘Knock Out’ roses, lambs ear, and geranium to create a veritable river of color and leaf interest.

Another successful execution is seen in the swathes of astilbe, hosta, and liriop used to frame a bluestone stair. Rather than line the path with the plants, the design firm planted them in waves rippling down the hillside. “To establish a planting design that looks like it was always there, you flow with the contours of the land,” explains Groft.

One of the components of the new American garden style is year round interest. Although this landscape is designed for vivid summer color, it is just as interesting in autumn when the black-eyed Susans have withered and seed heads dried. “We don’t deadhead anything or cut things down until late winter or early spring,” says Groft. “[The landscape] celebrates the moment when summer is

over and winter is upon us.”

To achieve a design that sublimely and subtly blends into nature and time, Groft offers advice that might seem counterintuitive: Think big. “Plant things in masses; it cuts down your maintenance and gives you a bold landscape. People go to a landscape center and buy two instead of 20, and if you plant two of anything, they disappear over time.”

Groft never worked against this shaded slope. Instead, he found plants such as Agapanthus, jasmine, and Stranvaesia that would weep beautifully downhill. By working with the land and not forcing it to behave a certain way, the design looks even better as it matures.

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– LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, ERIC GROFT