



The Lurie Garden in Chicago

The 'Primal Feel of Nature' The Gardens of Piet Oudolf

Piet Oudolf (° 1944) was in his thirties when he and his wife Anja started the nursery in Hummelo in the province of Gelderland. His first important garden, the Dream Park in Enköping in Sweden, dates back to 1996. The following year his book *Planting the Natural Garden* was published in the original Dutch edition, showing Oudolf's work alongside that of twelve other garden designers from the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, England and the United States. Innovative use of perennials and ornamental grasses was the overarching theme.

Oudolf's ideas were picked up by several young garden designers and journalists in England as a welcome rejuvenation of the English flower garden. In 2000 he was invited to design a garden for the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show, which was promptly crowned Best Show Garden. This brought Oudolf important work in England, including jobs at Scampston Hall and at Trentham Hall, a historical park in Stoke-on-Trent. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) even asked him to make two large flower borders at Wisley Gardens, the RHS showpiece. He also arranged the planting of the prestigious Potters Fields Park by London's Tower Bridge.

In 2001 the well-known American landscape architect Kathryn Gustafson asked Oudolf to work on the Lurie Garden, a large roof garden next to famous architect Frank Gehry's concert hall in Chicago's Millennium Park. Oudolf's definitive US breakthrough came a year later, when he was asked to come up with a master plan for the private institution behind The Battery in New York, a park on the banks of the Hudson River at the southernmost tip of Manhattan. On the back of this, in 2003 New York City Council asked him to make a memorial garden on the edge of the park for the victims of the attacks on the Twin Towers. These Gardens of Remembrance immediately made him famous.

In 2005 Oudolf was asked to collaborate on the High Line, a new city park on an old railway line ten metres above the ground, crossing trendy Chelsea and the rundown Meatpacking District. The High Line was a huge success: the park has become one of New York's most important tourist attractions, reviving the Meatpacking District, and Oudolf is currently working on extending it. Still in New York, he recently designed the gardens for Goldman Sachs' headquarters and Frank Gehry's new Beekman Towers too.

How can we explain Oudolf's phenomenal success? And what's so special about the New Perennial

Movement of which he is the figurehead, also known as Dutch New Naturalistic Gardening and New Wave Planting? His marked preference for naturalistic use of hardy perennials and ornamental grasses is a key part of this. This approach not only strikes a sensitive chord with traditional garden lovers, it also allows Oudolf and his supporters to bridge the gap between ecology and design. It all started in Oudolf's Hummelo nursery. With a few like-minded Dutch and German gardeners, he experimented with a new plant palette: strong, hardy plants which require little care and look natural, preferably single flowered varieties in warm shades of purple, red and brown. Following a few legendary German cultivators, such as Karl Foerster and Ernst Pagels, Oudolf also became a great advocate of ornamental grasses. Colour is of secondary importance to Oudolf, who prioritises plants' shape and structure, along with the way they die back and their winter look.

In addition to innovative choices of plants, Oudolf is also original in his combinations of large groups of plants and his overwhelmingly naturalistic approach. 'I want the plants to look as they do in nature,' he says. This is not about copying nature, which can only lead to disappointment. 'Studying the details of beautiful landscapes can show us how to use them successfully in the garden.' Nature as a source of inspiration for artistic form.

Several developments explain Oudolf's success in artistic circles. The Venice Biennale commissioned him to create a new flower garden in the Giardini, at the request of the Kunsthalle Bielefeld he designed an artistic garden in the German spa town of Bad Driburg, and renowned Swiss architect Peter Zumthor called on him to design the garden inside his temporary pavilion in London's Serpentine Gallery.

Plants don't need to be pretty or special in themselves, says Oudolf; the important thing is their role in the bigger picture. It is not the individual character of the plant which counts, but how they come together. Oudolf likes to compare his work to composing music. 'As in music, rhythm,



The High Lane in New York

repetition, coherence and scale play an important role in forming a fluent whole.' He also talks about complexity and creating order in chaos. 'A garden is a metaphor for nature. My gardens aren't wild gardens, but they do evoke the primal feel of nature. This is a gardening style for people who love nature, not for cowards or those who cling to traditional notions of orderliness.' By bringing the focus back to plants, Oudolf blows new life into landscape gardening. Plants are more than decoration or filler, they are an essential part of the design.

Perhaps the best word to describe Oudolf's gardens is 'sublime'. His flower gardens evoke images of nature, prairies and alpine meadows, unexpected images in the city. 'When you visit a garden or park, it should make you think. I want to touch people, I want them to respond to what they see, to be surprised or moved.' Perhaps this is the key to Oudolf's success: the residents of cities such as London and New York need more than good architects and designers, they need sublime images to move them too.

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