

The Cultural Landscape Foundation
Pioneers of American Landscape Design

JAMES VAN SWEDEN

ORAL HISTORY

REFLECTIONS

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Reflections on Landscape Design and Life Design Theories by Kurt Bluemel

August 24, 2010

I have enjoyed a synergistic relationship with Oehme Van Sweden for upwards of 35 years.

I came to this country to apply the landscape design theories that I learned in Switzerland. In fact, I built this business based on my passion for design. In the first 30 years of this business, I had the opportunity to design and help others design some very significant projects not the least of which was Disney's Animal Kingdom. I had the great fortune of being a consultant, purveyor and grower for that project along with dozens and dozens of other talented people. Among my great opportunities, was the chance to work with other European designers such as Wolfgang Oehme and James Van Sweden

In the early years we all struggled to find specific plant material that we required to make our hardscape designs come alive and become true garden rooms. There were very limited choices, most of which were not hardy or had vivid unnatural color scapes that did not blend nicely with my use of natural materials such as flagstone, indigenous stone and water elements. You can imagine the frustration of designing a beautiful flagstone patio only to be offered white petunias and red geraniums to surround it. Spring in America was a veritable riot of color and then lawns, lawns, and more lawns for the rest of the year. Our collective desire and demand for four (4) seasons of garden interest was also a new idea. Sure, you hear all about garden rooms, outdoor living spaces, and naturalizing your environment now, but at one time these were such foreign ideas here. A collaborative of European horticulturists was able to effect those early changes and transition the American landscape into what it is today.

If you have been involved in landscaping as long as I have you'll well remember those days and that look. Front door flanked by enormous trees manicured into a stunted mess until they became uncontrollable, white crushed stones in little garden squares around the mailbox, linear gardens like runways that outlined the house all surrounding the ever-important green lawn, and neat little rows of rainbows of marigolds, geraniums, petunias and the dotted-in annual asters. That wouldn't do for us.

The demand for plants as the New American Landscape spread bi-coastally became greater and greater. I decided that I would become the grower of the plants that were struggling to find and make them readily available. Oehme and Van Sweden have been buying plants from my nursery for their designs from the very beginning. I have been keenly focused on providing the most interesting, vigorous, and dramatic plant material that speaks to our original design theories.

I have and continue to work shoulder to shoulder with landscape designers such as Oehme and Van Sweden for years. I taught some and learned from others, but ultimately growing the much needed ornamental grasses, hardy perennials, and bamboos that would give their designs life was and will always be my true passion and purpose.

Reflections of Jim by Hilda Brillembourg August 2010

Honoring an outstanding artist who is also a friend is not easy. In honoring a friend you honor loyalty, integrity, immediacy, shared memories and most importantly the soul of a kindred spirit with whom you have laughed and cried, with whom you have shared humanity. In honoring an artist and his work, you honor creativity, excellence, dedication to his task and a life-long pursuit of an artistic vision of the world around us. What is common in honoring both the friend and the artist, is the amount of happiness shared in his company and in the presence of his work.

There have been so many unforgettably happy times shared with Jim! Walking by the likely site of the pool to determine which way the wind blew so there would always be a cool spot in which to sit by the pool even in the hottest summer day. Fighting over a rose garden, not Jim's favorite flower. I suggested his next book be called "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden". But he did give us a beautiful rose garden right in the middle of the entrance, for all to see and enjoy. The roses bloom from April through November in defiance of Jim's disdain for them. Some women are just like that!

There was also the day in which we were lounging by the pool reading aloud the transcription of Monica Lewinsky's grand jury testimony, and laughing so much and so loud it seemed impossible that Jim did not live there next to us so we could have this much fun every Sunday. I stopped reading and said, "Jim, you have to get a home here, this is too much fun." And then we went looking for a piece of land to build Jim's house on the Eastern Shore: That special place in which so many of our spirits have been enlarged in the presence of nature and Jim's creativity.

On a final and most special memory for a mother, there were a few spots in the garden purposefully designed for the day in which our daughter, Clara, would marry. Here are the pictures that show that dreams come true when you have friends who make them possible. There are few people in life that make life grander and more meaningful than Jim Van Sweden, best friend and artist.

With much love,

Hilda



Reflections on Jim van Sweden by Barbara Whitney Carr
Retired President, Chicago Botanic Garden
August 2010



Jim, Barbara Carr and Kris Jarantoski, at the dedication of Evening Island and the Gardens of the Great Basin, September 19, 2002

It would be difficult to overstate the institutional importance of the meeting in 1999 at Chicago Botanic Garden where I first met Jim van Sweden.

We were meeting to interview design finalists for the development of almost 15 acres in the center of the 400-acre Chicago Botanic Garden. The design was to incorporate 5.5-acre Evening Island, water gardens in the 7-acre Great Basin, multiple gardens on its perimeters, as well as bridges to connect the Garden's largest Island to its second largest one. The view incorporating Evening Island and its water gardens was to be an iconic vista from the most visited space in the entire Garden. Beyond being a key vista, it was to be a beckoning invitation to walkers, a refreshing and enlightening experience for those who crossed its bridges and ventured onto the Island; and it was to establish a design vocabulary which could be extended to become a unifying feature throughout the entire Garden. The design of Evening Island and the Gardens of the Great Basin were at the very heart of the Garden both literally and symbolically. Whoever took on this project would leave a mark on an important public Garden by which it would be defined for years to come.

Jim walked into a room of over a dozen people seated formally, with two walls of glass overlooking a cold and crystalline late winter view. His arrival immediately filled the room with warmth that was reflected in his very genuine smile. He had a presence that radiated energy and enthusiasm and creativity -- and, importantly, a happy self assurance which left his audience wondering how they could ever entrust this important assignment to ANYONE but Jim Van Sweden, to his trusted and quiet partner Wolfgang Oehme, and to his talented colleagues who, one guessed, must spend a good part of their time reining in the exuberance and sweep and bigness of vision which Jim made clear was the very essence of his work.

He stood up to present, flicked on the computer and the large presentation screen was filled with the image of a beautiful abstract painting which he used to describe his inspiration in large scale landscapes: Big sweeps of color, lovely simple structure, balance and scale and elegant organic lines. Suddenly we knew this man understood our vision, knew he could create what we could only dream of, and that NOTHING could make him happier than to do it for us.

But what also shone through on that first meeting was the no-nonsense and grounded work ethic that Jim and his colleagues radiated -- his Midwestern roots simply must have played a part in creating a man whose design sense reflected the long views of the Michigan farms throughout the changing seasons, the elegance of their simplicity, and the grounded mid-American values of growing up in the heartland between the Great Lakes: Solid as a rock. A man you could trust.

The Botanic Garden Committee voted unanimously at the conclusion of that presentation to hire Oehme, van Sweden & Associates to take on the design of Evening Island, the bridges and gardens of the Great Basin. Three years of hard work and fun followed; the van Sweden team under Jim's leadership continued to delight and surprise us at every turn; construction began a year later in the spring of 2000; and at summer's end in 2002 the project concluded and happily opened to wonderful reviews.

The friendship that began on that cold morning when Jim's warmth filled the room has grown and continued over the past decade as project after project has come on line at the Botanic Garden. Now when Chicago Botanic Garden visitors look out toward Evening Island, they see a classic "New American Garden" landscape. What I see is the face of a friend whose smile and sparkling eyes said it all on that morning we first met and whose gifts have continued to delight and instruct literally hundreds of thousands of visitors each year since then. Nothing short of FABULOUS, as Jim would say.

Reflections on Travels with Jim by Barbara Downs - Washington DC July 2010



In the autumn of 1983, Jim and I went on an AHS tour of Asian gardens with ten days spent in Japan. On our first day in Tokyo we visited five extraordinary private gardens. I remember one garden in particular. It belonged to a house in traditional Japanese design. The details of the garden were exquisite with carefully placed layers of stone and plants separating the house from a large pool which swept around the back and sides of the house. The pool was inky black and filled with shimmering koi carp. It had some water plants and rough stones which were carefully placed to make it look completely natural, but at the same time quite dramatic. Jim was so excited by the proportions of the design which created a feeling of a vast expanse although the house and garden were relatively modest in size and located in a congested warren of city streets. It seemed to me that this house opened a large room in his imagination where he could create gardens for clients who would understand the dramatic juxtaposition of water, stone and plants. He soon found many such clients and designed a significant number of the magnificent gardens which have been photographed in his books and elsewhere.

Jim was so excited by the AHS trip that he couldn't wait to return. We arranged to visit Japan in December of 1986, allowing a month's time to explore and photograph gardens. We travelled throughout the country but concentrated our visit in Kyoto where we visited the three magnificent Imperial Gardens. Jim was inspired by the detail and the simplicity of the designs. He was intrigued by the use of pathways connecting a series of intimate spaces with large scenic vistas. Natural materials used in all of these gardens: bamboo fences, rough weathered stones and pebbles as well as natural plant material: ferns, moss and carefully orchestrated forests of pine and deciduous trees. In these gardens and the others we visited, Jim took dozens of photos of details of stone work, paths, walls, waterfalls, stone basins, gates, fences, tile work, drainpipes and stone gutters. It all served a library of very simple and elegant solutions to the problems encountered in designing gardens.

After this trip Jim designed the garden at my house in Georgetown. It incorporated many of the ideas from the Japanese gardens Jim and I had visited: a dry stream pathway meandering back to a millstone fountain, plants that refer to Japan, a crepe myrtle with twelve sinuous trunks, a dwarf bamboo, white Japanese iris and anemones as well as a tapestry of traditional perennials.

The garden is very narrow --- about 18' and deep 80' but we are blessed with congenial borrowed scenery from our neighbors and a vine covered wall at the rear. It is the focus of our house and my husband and I love to sit there in all seasons, listening to the fountain and to the birds which are attracted to the bubbling water and the protective trees.

Reflections by David Ebershoff

Editor-at-Large, Random House Publishing Group

August 2010

Jim and I first met several years ago when I became his editor at Random House. Soon afterwards he invited me down to Washington to visit some of his gardens. As he led me through gates and down paths and behind fences and along hedges, and explained how the gardens had come to be, I realized something important about Jim: he is a storyteller. At lunch he tells stories, on the phone he tells stories, and, through his gardens, he is always telling stories. His gardens tell stories about what has transpired there and, just as important, what one day might occur. When standing in one of his gardens it's easy to imagine the picnic, the nap, the day-dream, the assignation that the grasses and trees have inspired. It's easy to see a woman in the sunlight, a child in the shade, a couple walking through a field. One can conjure the moods of the garden's visitors: the joy, the sorrow, the longing, the ache. Jim understands that the art of garden design, like the art of storytelling, is about people - that there is no point in laying a path or seeding a meadow or writing a book if it is not going to touch the people who experience it. And that's what makes his work, both as a designer and an author, so lasting: to come into contact with Jim and his art is to be forever moved.

A Reflection by Jason Epstein

July 2010



About ten years ago Jim suggested that I plant a row of hakenakloa alongside a hundred foot long path of old red bricks. The idea was to block a patch of rampant pests. Today that grass has formed yellow and green layers four or five feet high, breaking over themselves like waves rolling leisurely ashore. The path had been lined with top down yellow lights whose glow through this gentle sea of grass especially on foggy nights is pure poetry. Today hakenakloa highlights pop up all over my garden, constant reminders of Jim's genius

Cynthia Hamowy on her Garden
August 2010



I love it here! I can look out my windows from any room in the house and there is a vista- even from the bedrooms. I never close the shades because I have this wonderful view of nature. To quote Jim from [Gardening with Nature](#) "the house becomes a viewing platform for the garden's many components, both front and back." I love the rough and wild look of the edges of the property.

Reflection by Kris S. Jarantoski

Executive Vice President & Director, Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL
August 2010



Jim and Kris on Evening Island in September 2004

After reading Jim van Sweden's books and admiring his work (originally at the National Arboretum) for many years, I finally had the opportunity to work with Jim, Lisa Delplace, and Sheila Brady on the design and construction of Evening Island and the Gardens of the Great Basin, beginning in 1999.

Jim's enthusiasm and creativity lent itself well to the large landscape the Chicago Botanic Garden desired. This landscape would showcase the "New American Garden" style to hundreds of thousands of people in the upper Midwest who had never heard of it before.

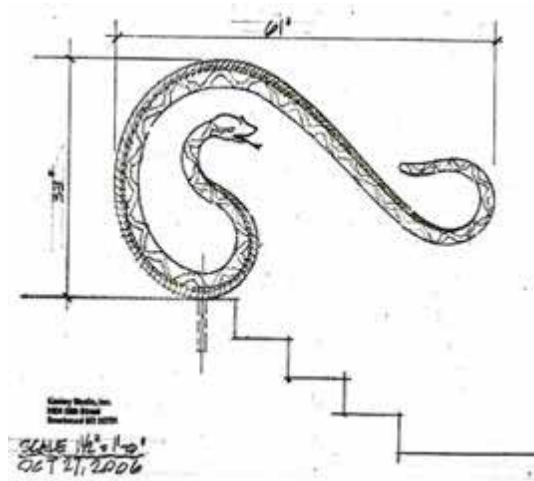
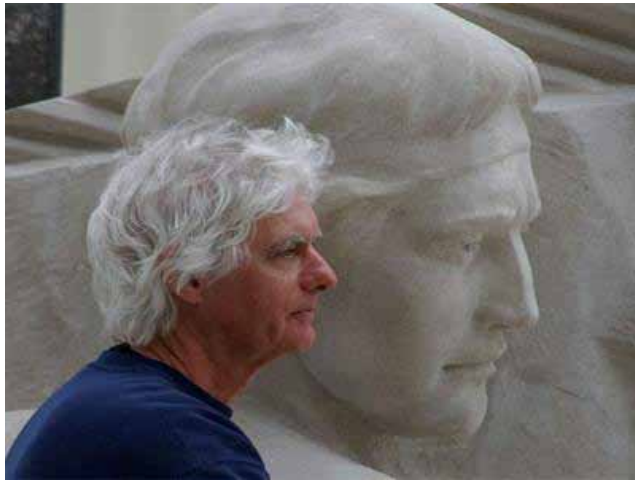
Speaking as a client, the Oehme, van Sweden team was a dream to work with. Their excellent visuals and collaborative spirit helped our side articulate exactly what we wanted and helped deliver a final product that fulfilled our dreams. The "on time" and "on budget" process was wonderful. Jim's final pronouncement on the gardens was his usual "this is FANTASTIC!"

The gardens were dedicated in 2002. The public has been wild about them ever since. There have been many imitators since, but Jim's originality continues to shine through.

RAYMOND KASKEY

Sculptor

July 2010



I knew Jim Van Sweden's work around Washington DC before I knew Jim. That is to say I didn't know who, if indeed anybody at all, had created such an unusual landscape fronting a Federal building or the back garden of a Georgetown house. Both venues looked "natural" as if they just grew that way without any "design." Of course that is the secret of the Oehme Van Sweden firm—they make everything look almost unplanned, graceful and easy when it's anything but.

Years passed before I got the chance to work with Jim and Sheila Brady, a partner in his office. When Friedrich St. Florian became a semi-finalist in the National World War II Memorial competition he needed a landscape architect and a sculptor among other professionals to complete his team for the final phase. Thus began an eight year collaboration between architect, landscape architect and sculptor when we became the winning team in December 1996.

What I remember most about Jim in those days was getting ready for a series of contentious public presentations. Jim knew the work doesn't speak for itself even if brilliant. You have to be able to communicate it to a skeptical client, government agency and/or public at large. Here Jim brooks no competition. And the postmortem analysis over drinks and dinner always moved things forward.

At the personal end of the scale I had the privilege to be commissioned by Jim to create a sculpture for his own garden in St. Michaels on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He wanted a snake in the form of a hand rail for his swimming pool. I can only surmise that perhaps he realized that a garden, like the Garden of Eden, needs a snake to provide that acid note. Whatever, my first attempt was dismissed because it looked too much like a hand rail rather than the desired

herpetological fantasy. Rejection brought to mind the lesson of Jim's work, i. e. the "natural," while working with the materials on hand, is highly contrived. I just had to let what snakes do best shape the hand rail. Thanks to Jim I think the snake hand rail rose to the level of the easy looking naturalism but very studied design of his amazing garden.

Reflections on knowing Jim from Chip Knight

August 2010

When my wife and I decided to build a walled garden at our farm on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Jim suggested a trip together to tour English walled gardens for ideas and inspiration. The prospect of seeing some of the most beautiful gardens in the world through Jim's discerning eyes was thrilling. But we were a little nervous. We had been working with OvS on the initial landscaping for the farm for only three years. Beyond a few meetings and site visits, we didn't know Jim at all. And let's be honest, he comes across as a rather exotic flower. What would he be like as a travel companion?

We needn't have worried. No one could have been easier, more fun or more in tune with our own travel rhythms. We always wanted to get started, eat, rest, break for the day or, most important, have a drink at exactly the same time. Jim showed great imagination and even chutzpah as tour leader. He enlisted the services of illustrious British landscape architect John Brookes and garden photographer Andrew Lawson to be our local guides. They unlocked the gates of some special private gardens. When we arrived at Stourhead only to find it closed, Jim persuaded the gatekeepers to let us in, though we did have to promise not to scribble graffiti on the temples. We also arrived at our much-anticipated visit to Sissinghurst on its normal closing day. "How could this happen?" I muttered to Jim. Just then, a lady emerged and said that since the Chelsea Flower Show was taking place that week, they had decided to open the garden. "Would you like to come in?" she inquired. We roamed through Sissinghurst virtually alone for most of the morning.

The highlight of our trip was Rousham House in Oxfordshire. Jim promised we'd love this untouched Williams Kent garden and he was right. But Jim's perspective made it truly special. He knew just where to turn to see the remarkable view. He explained how the garden circuit worked to perfection. He pointed out that the garden was maintained to just the right degree of imperfection. And while we gazed at the landscape, Jim took countless photos of all the small, intricate details of the hardscape. As for describing the plants -- well, he'd leave that to Wolfgang.

A brief reflection on James Van Sweden from Marilyn Melkonian

August 2010



Marilyn at the time of the Paradise Manor Project

I have known and loved Jim Van Sweden for more than 45 years. We met in the stairwell of a Capitol Hill townhouse where he and his wife Linda lived on the top floors and I on the first. They had just returned to America in early 1964 after four years in the Netherlands, their ancestors' homeland once removed. Having left in the calm of the ending Eisenhower years, they missed the soaring hopes and tragic end of the first three years of the 1960's. To their patient amazement, I filled them in on everything that had happened while they were away.

Jim is ten years my senior. He became and is my teacher, mentor, exemplar in the magical world of urban design and philosophy, and a great friend (and, from time to time in student years, houser of last resort). Oehme Van Sweden became the model "business" for me. I followed in his footsteps, starting a company around regenerating communities in partnership with neighborhood people. Jim and I saw the spaces in between and around buildings as the important connections between sky and earth; serving, delighting, and connecting the people living there. His landscape architecture is the architecture on which neighborhoods regenerate. He always welcomed the work of resident gardeners into his landscapes, praising the addition of favorite vegetables or the surprise of a well tended rose bush, as improvements on OVS designs; and designing playgrounds and fountains in collaboration with their end users, the children in the neighborhood.

Jim and I have worked together over the last 25 years in more than 25 places creating beautiful spaces and gardens that flow from his imagination and great talent. He has brought his special

vision to unexpected places in America's urban neighborhoods, changing the less than ordinary into the extraordinary. The rich are not his only beneficiaries.

Congratulations Jim!

Susan Rademacher - Reflections on Jim van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme

August 2010

James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme have forged an extraordinary union of design that liberated the American garden – through a looking glass reflecting seemingly opposite partners – in their marriage of wonderfully unique personas, gifts, and skills.

Jim and Wolfgang first swept me off my feet at our first meeting during the ASLA Annual Meeting at the Washington Hilton in the early 1980s. My colleague at *Landscape Architecture* magazine, Norman Johnson, insisted that I absolutely must know their work as we were preparing to launch *Garden Design* magazine. Of course, he was right.

Until that time, I was schooled in the garden traditions of the Old South and the Northwest, of classic forms and tidy aesthetics. But when Jim took me to see the Richard Helms garden, a small hillside swept with ornamental grasses and boisterous perennials, I was transfixed by the garden's grace and tactility, and exhilarated with the sense of freedom it gave me. With each new landscape we visited, Jim and Wolfgang opened their world and invited me in.

In design, they showed me elegant mastery of scale, form, texture and color. From Wolfgang, especially, came the deep knowledge of horticulture, ever lusting to expand the palette, adoring plants throughout all seasons of life, planting so fast that his hands were a blur. From Jim, especially, came the deep pleasure in the beautiful, exacting attention to detail, and inspiration from other artists and places as wide ranging as Roberto Burle Marx and Kyoto.

That marvelous and satisfying tension between the robust and the refined was what Jim's title for their first book, *Bold Romantic Gardens*, was all about. It was a great privilege to write this book with them, and to work with their superb colleagues on this project. It was clear from the beginning that this book was to be beautiful and substantive, with no hesitation to reveal trade secrets. Jim was especially keen to contribute a work of lasting value to the profession of landscape architecture, and the series of books since published have done exactly that.

Jim and Wolfgang's marriage of opposites has brought forward work that melds bravado and tranquility, strength and subtlety, exuberance and restraint. Together, through their work and their partnership, Jim and Wolfgang have created richly rewarding places for both public and private lives.

Carole Rosenberg's Memorable Reflections

August 2010



Carole and Alex Rosenberg, photograph by Michael Halsband.

It was a Sunday afternoon in August 1981 when Lila Katzen, an artist we represented in our gallery, and her husband Phil came to visit us in Water Mill. Alex and I had spent the morning selecting plants at a local nursery and were busy installing them when the Katzens arrived. Phil and Alex went into the house to prepare some drinks and hors d'ouvres and Lila kept me company while I continued my planting of 35 pots. I complained to Lila that our efforts were producing very little in the way of a landscape. Lila responded by telling me of a magnificent garden at the Federal Reserve in Washington, DC where she had just installed one of her sculptures. "You should call the landscape architects," she suggested. Since we had not seen the work of any local landscape architects that inspired us, I asked for their names.

The next day I was on the phone to Jim van Sweden and he visited us about a month later. Turning the pages of his portfolio was an enlightening experience. Alex and I began gardening at very young ages and thought we knew about plants and planting. The pictures of the Federal Reserve that Lila spoke of were breathtaking. There were plants we never heard of and mass plantings that reminded us of broad strokes in color field paintings we saw in galleries and museums. I knew that James van Sweden and his partner Wolfgang Oehme would create a landscape with their grasses and perennials beyond our imagination. It did not take much convincing Alex that they were the perfect team to transform our garden, whose south side is an inlet of Mecox Bay, that was not visible from the house when we bought it a few years before.

Some weeks later we had the pleasure of a visit from Wolfgang Oehme, who knew more about plants than most encyclopedias. He took measurements and advised us that plans would be

drawn. The pool had been dug before we met Jim and Wolfgang and fortunately, we had not done any terracing. The final drawings were incredible.

In the fall of 1981, Jim Van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme transformed the Alex Rosenberg Gallery into a garden for the exhibition, *Sculpture Returns to the Garden*, featuring Lila Katzen's newest work. It was an amazing exhibition and the sculpture looked extraordinary set in the Oehme, van Sweden garden. It was the beginning of a long and successful collaboration.

In the spring of 1982, the terraces and walkways were installed. The last days of June Wolfgang, his 13 year-old son, Roland and Mr. Brandt with his team of young adults arrived from Maryland with truckloads of plant material propagated in the nurseries of Kurt Bluemel. They spent 2 days living and eating with us. Wolfgang laid out thousands of small plants and in one and half days the team dug them into the ground, just missing rain. The garden was on its way. Weeks later, Jim helped me buy clay pots and plant them with showy perennials while the garden started to grow. By the end of the summer we started to see the amazing grasses and perennials growing. It was the beginning of Oehme, van Sweden's first bold, romantic garden in the Hamptons and what turned out to be a very special friendship.

When newspapers and magazines began calling, we realized that we had started something new and special on the east end. Landscape architects, garden designers and horticulturists came to visit. Marc Cathey, President of The National Arboretum spent some week-ends with us where he delivered his radio show from one of our guest rooms. He referred to Oehme, van Sweden gardens as the *New American Garden*. People called in with questions and listening to the answers was an education.

Alex and I were working with the Hofstra University museum and shortly thereafter, I was invited to Chair the first Advisory Board of the Hofstra University Arboretum and Sculpture Garden. Before long the President of Hofstra wanted an Oehme, van Sweden garden on the campus for the University Club.

A new dimension was added to our already creative life as art dealers, curators and consultants. Our Water Mill house was set in a magnificent garden where design blends with the natural elements of water, sky and reeds. Sweeping masses of ornamental grasses, perennials, flowering bulbs and rare clump bamboo create a different palette in each season. The herb and vegetable gardens not only offer a display of seasonal texture and color but a cornucopia of fresh culinary treats. A formal terrace for dining overlooking spectacular views of the bay is bordered by low grasses and perennials. Steps lead to the pool terrace on a lower level, where *Pennisetum alopecuroides* soften the lines of the pool while the sculptural *Miscanthus sinensis* sways and sings in the sea breeze.

In 1986, we had the opportunity to move up to a higher floor with terraces in the building where we live in Manhattan. Andrée Putman was the interior designer and worked closely with Oehme van Sweden on the construction of a greenhouse attached to the apartment that Alex uses for an office. The gardens that face south, west and north were designed with arbors and trellises. Trees, grasses, perennials and bulbs were planted in boxes and each spring pots are planted with annuals and herbs. There are places for dining and relaxing. Every day, we have the fortune to live with an Oehme, van Sweden garden and are grateful for Lila Katzen's encouragement and introduction. It has been our pleasure to share our wonderful experience with all those who venture to try something new and exciting.

When Lila died some years ago, Wolfgang brought us a special shrub *Clerodendrum trichotomum fargesii* (fragrant white flowers followed by midnight blue berries and red calyxes), also known as Harlequin Glorybower and planted it facing the water in her memory.

Our long-term friendship with Jim and Wolfgang has been important in our lives. We have enjoyed many wonderful experiences with Jim and his friends, the Nefs and Sorgs.

Wolfgang has adopted our garden as his own and visits frequently with his friends Carol and Paul. He always manages to find new and unusual plants to try out in the Rosenberg Garden making it more interesting all the time. Some even find their way into Holger Winenga's Garden Treasures Nursery.

Reflections by Sunny Jung Scully

August 2010



Here are a few thoughts as I look back on my time with Jim and Wolfgang (1981-85)

As the first trained landscape architect in the office, I was initially amazed at the lack of formal plans and specifications to guide the quality of garden production. However, I did find that what existed was a partnership that set the tone for all the success that would follow. Jim was a great designer- he could have made a success at designing anything. He simply had good taste, and the confidence to sell his ideas to just about anyone. Wolfgang lived to explore the nature of arranging plants. My entree into their world came from my background in Wisconsin- working with native prairie restoration and grasses.

We worked from the basement of Jim's Georgetown townhouse. As a client showed interest- Jim would set us to creating sketch concepts. Sometimes that's all we relied upon to build those early gardens. It was a design - build operation. We were very hands-on in approach, and the early designs leaned heavily on their plantings for expression. Hardscapes were simple local materials laid out to feature or showcase lush gardens. While we expressed the scope to the contractor, we always were present on the job- laying out, placing everything and adjusting as we went. Most clients trusted us to create a special work of art for them, and budgets were generally set to allow some latitude. We all sort of felt our way into those early projects and learned a great deal from the experience. I remember the three of us scattering and planting several thousand fall bulbs on a job. We felt that it was easier and better to do it ourselves than try and explain it to a contractor. We cared about intersecting patterns of color and the succession of bloom times. My hands and back were sore for days. But I learned so much about building gardens from them. The level of sophistication kept increasing every year.

Wolfgang wasn't happy unless he had total control to move things around till they were happy in their setting. Having been part of the horticultural extravaganza in Berlin- he was ever exploring new plants to introduce. While there were many wonderful outcomes- there were also a few hard lessons such as Heracleum, which was terribly invasive and physically painful to control. He eventually formed a fine relationship with grower, Kurt Bluemel- who made the transition of providing quantity and quality of these new plants. This provided a springboard for using large quantities of perennials and grasses. In the early '80's, there were few non-traditional plant types available. It's really amazing how rapidly the nursery industry jumped to provide what we now take for granted in the plant palette of available species. Everyone wanted to learn, once they'd seen plantings survive and succeed in these unique new designs that the firm was producing. Not everything thrived, but we faithfully returned and nurtured the clients so that solutions were forthcoming that resolved most issues. It was a marvelous time to work with these men, as everyone had a chance to try out ideas.

In those early days, the firm relied primarily on residential projects. Few commercial clients at that time were interested in the maintenance and special qualities of these fine gardens. The Federal Reserve was one of those rare exceptions, and that was due to the backing of the chairman, who (at the instigation of his wife) took great interest in having a unique statement for their headquarters after a disastrous winter that killed most of their traditional southern plantings. There were several large projects, but it was generally more difficult in those days to produce the specifications, as we were just figuring out many of the techniques, and it didn't lend itself to the general contractor bidding process. Those things changed with a growing sophistication in the market place. But in the early years, it was far easier to control the outcome when all the variables were under the firm's control in the contracts.

One of the greatest pleasures for me was working with Jim as art was introduced into the garden. Always an ardent supporter of the arts- it was wonderful to see Jim's flamboyant insistence on working with sculptors and artists. While viewing their own work as a masterpiece- it was seldom considered finished without the interplay of water and sculpture. The nature of creating a special place was how they viewed every project. Their gardens express a unique quality that sets them apart from most. It takes a masterful touch to get the massing and materials coordinated properly. Most of their gardens are imminently photogenic from many points, which has led Jim to create the books and articles that express their principles. He learned from some good photographers, and then achieved best results by teaching the new generation of photographers what he wanted to see in the way of light, focus and mystery. He has used his fine design talents to make those books beneficial to our profession, yet intriguing and useful to the general public. The level of interest in planting design has been significantly raised by the firm's work and subsequent visibility. Their niche

grew beyond anything they might have imagined, and landscape architects have a far richer palette to draw upon expressly because they pursued their vision so diligently.

Reflections on James van Sweden from Suman Sorg, FAIA

September 2011



I met Jim van Sweden in 1987 when we collaborated on the first project I undertook after launching my own architecture practice in Washington, DC. I didn't know then that this collaboration would last for the next 25 years on commissions from Washington to Nepal and that I would gain a great friend and neighbor in the process.

Though we have collaborated on projects all over the world, the most fun we had was designing Jim's house and garden on the Eastern shore of Maryland. The result of our work together has always been a fine balance between architecture and landscape architecture, and this project was its perfection. The process, though, got a little intense at times. I remember that during design, Jim was so worried about the ceiling height of the living room, he called me at 2am from London to "discuss". I told him it was fine and that he should go back to bed.

From traveling together to Paris for the State Department to sitting in his living room at the shore on a summer day, I have been truly privileged to share in Jim's unique humor and knowledge and friendship.

Reflections on my Oehme van Sweden Garden by Rosita Trinca

August 2010

I first met Jim in the long azalea lined airstrip of our driveway in 1992. He was immediately a commanding presence; with a sudden and mischievous smile. Within seconds he and Eric Groft (then an associate with Oehme and van Sweden) condemned the driveway. He didn't mince words - and still doesn't.

Simon and I had struggled with the garden that surrounded the 1904 built house on a corner in Greenwich, Ct. The drive seemed to echo the traffic outside and so the suggestion felt right. With broad gestures Jim painted a wild and romantic picture of what the garden could look like. He had an infectious enthusiasm and it all seemed terribly exciting. Down the conversational track backhoes and drainage were mentioned and, it was at this point that, we asked what it all might cost. The figure took me aback; but he responded ... "you've got to live!"

As the garden developed over the years I have often thought over that phrase. It has meant different things at different times. At first I thought it rather flippant; but as I have enjoyed this ever changing garden with its certain "seize the moment" quality I think I know what Jim meant.

I have recently laughed at the turtle that got out of the lily pool to walk to the swimming pool for a swim and then shuffled back; found joy in the choreography of the little birds picking at seeds; watched the watchful blue heron pick off the koi. I have fought some losing battles with storms and weeds; but I have made many friends through the garden. It has added another dimension to living.

Reflections on James van Sweden by Charles E. Turner

August 2010

As a long-term friend and associate, I am delighted and honored to share my thoughts in praise of James van Sweden's remarkable career in landscape design and gardening.

Jim has a great passion for plant materials and other elements of the garden, especially including the "hardscape" that ties his gardens together. This sets the stage visually for a glorious palette of trees, shrubs, grasses, and other garden features.

While on his quest to raise the quality of landscape design and gardening in America and elsewhere, Jim generously shares his concepts and ideas through his many writings and lectures.

I am privileged to have worked closely with Jim as he also shares these ideas through the ongoing series of books he authors. Readers, including homeowners and professionals, gain much from the descriptions of completed gardens and the beautiful drawings and photographs.

Finally, I personally feel rewarded and honored to have observed Jim's brilliant and natural approach to the art of landscape design.