



# Dreaming Big: Garden Club of Michigan and the Evolution of Oudolf Garden Detroit

It's a beautiful late August day, and I can easily pick them out, the "busy bees" of Garden Club of Michigan carting plants for placement in the new garden on Belle Isle designed by Piet Oudolf, recipient of the GCA's 2019 Medal of Honor.

It all began in 2014 at a GC of Michigan strategic planning session. A broad representation of the membership gathered to contemplate the club's future. At the top of the list—finding a project to align with member interests and enable collaboration with the broader community. A club poll indicated overwhelming support for an effort on Belle Isle, the 982-acre island park in the middle of the Detroit River between the US and Canada. What about a new garden there?

Once used by French settlers to shelter hogs from wolves, the land was purchased by the city of Detroit in 1879. Frederick Law Olmsted was contracted to design a public park on Belle Isle, but his plan was mired in controversy and only partially implemented. Over the years a variety of features have been built on the island and more than 200 acres of original woodland remain. But the passage of time and a lack of funds led to disrepair. After Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which manages state parks,



Drone's-eye view of Oudolf Garden Detroit under construction. Photo by Ryan Southen

agreed to take over maintenance of Belle Isle.

GC of Michigan dared to dream big. The club considered local, national, and international landscape designers for a project on Belle Isle's Sunset Point and ultimately agreed on Piet Oudolf. Next challenge—how to attract the superstar? We followed a series of connections: someone who knew someone, who knew someone, who knew Oudolf. No luck. By then it was 2016, and as the club's special projects chairman, I made a cold call to Tom Piper, filmmaker of *Five Seasons: The Gardens of Piet Oudolf*. He answered! He

encouraged me to post a love letter from Detroit written in a final effort. Three club members cosigned the message, which generated a call from Oudolf just after Christmas 2016. Discussions began. Never having seen Detroit, Oudolf planned an April visit.

Oudolf pronounced that Sunset Point wouldn't work because of frequent closures for special events. "I don't build gardens to keep people out. I build gardens to bring people in." So he studied alternatives. Six of us were with him on April 5, 2017, when he cried, "Stop the car!" He got out,

raised his hands, and said, "Here. Here is where my garden should go." The chosen spot is the cultural heart of the island near the conservatory and aquarium, adjacent to an area regularly used by families, schools, and church groups for picnicking. The 2.5-acre site was perfect.

Oudolf set about designing the garden, and GC of Michigan began fundraising. Club coffers provided \$25,000, and individual members raised the remaining funds needed to commission the initial design. To ensure the garden's future, Oudolf and our agreement with



GC of Michigan members (L-R in aprons) Muffy Milligan, Patricia Gotfredson, and Jean Hudson sorting plants for installation at Oudolf Garden Detroit. Photo by Max Ortiz, *The Detroit News*



Plant installation at Oudolf Garden Detroit. Photo by Ryan Southen



Piet Oudolf presenting his design. Photo by Maura Campbell

the DNR stipulated that the funds for garden installation and endowment had to be raised prior to groundbreaking. Realizing that the project was bigger than the club could

manage alone, several members formed Oudolf Garden Detroit, and others were invited to join the effort.

In a city beleaguered by bad news, the garden project offered

a glimmer of hope. Garden club members; neighborhood groups; and government, business, and community leaders were invited to meet Oudolf. The DNR conducted public hearings and planning sessions. All the while fundraising continued. A successful sponsor-a-plant drive and friend-raising events indicated broad community support. At the \$4 million mark, groundbreaking took place in June 2019. Sadly, flooding followed by the pandemic called a halt to construction. In May 2020 work resumed. The first planting of Oudolf's redesigned garden, well above flood levels, was underway in September. The Grounds Crew, a volunteer operating team for Oudolf Garden Detroit, included an array of professionals and

ardent supporters of the project, including members of GC of Michigan.

From start to finish, dedicated GC of Michigan club members have played an essential role in the creation of a garden for all, an Oudolf masterwork on Belle Isle. When they welcome diverse populations, gardens become a place to find peace, hope, and healing. When your club realizes a shared dream, it's uplifting and invigorating. Dream big! Have faith!

—Maura Campbell, GC of Michigan, Zone X, with Margaret Williams, Pasadena GC, Zone XII