

DUTCH TREAT

An Oudolf garden on Belle Isle?
Turns out, he digs Detroit

The Nancy Brown Peace Carillon, a Belle Isle landmark since 1940, provides a dramatic backdrop looking south from Oudolf Garden Detroit.



It was the longest of long shots. Getting Dutch superstar Piet Oudolf to design one of his trademark gardens in your town is a little like setting your heart on Frank Gehry for that new building. Good luck getting through the gate.

But the 110-year-old Garden Club of Michigan, with a long history of philanthropic gifts to the city of Detroit, was determined to try. So the club's brain trust—Maura Campbell, Richard Thomas and DAC member Jean Hudson—put pen to paper in late 2016 and wrote the master “plantsman” behind Lurie Garden in Chicago’s Millennium Park and New York’s immensely popular High Line.

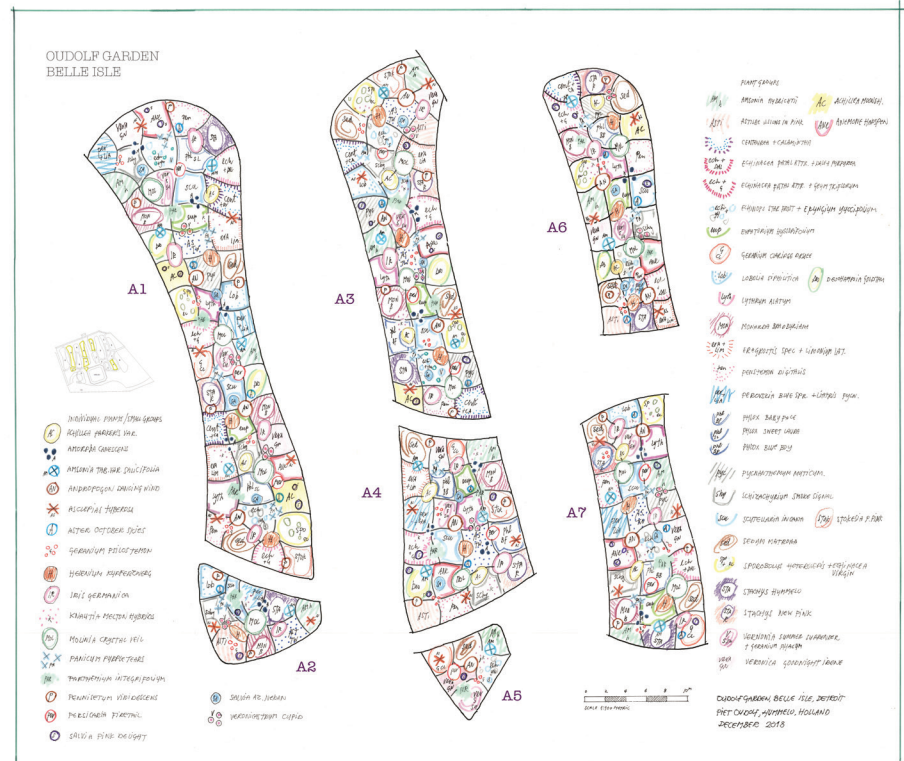
They didn’t pull any punches. Their opening line read: “This is a love letter from Detroit.”

The letter did the trick. Reached recently at his home in the Netherlands, Oudolf laughed and said, “It was funny and a very nice introduction. But,” added the designer, who turns down hundreds of appeals a year, “that didn’t mean I’d necessarily do the project.

“But I was always curious about Detroit city. It’s been through such bad years, but I also knew there was a big art scene. So I thought, ‘Let’s see.’”



Richard Thomas, one of three Garden Club of Michigan members who wrote Piet Oudolf in 2016, volunteers most weekends to weed Oudolf Garden Detroit.



Piet Oudolf’s meticulous garden plans are almost works of art themselves. To prepare for planting, assistants spray-painted the bare dirt with colors corresponding to the plan. Images this page courtesy of Oudolf Garden Detroit.

That curiosity has blossomed into Oudolf Garden Detroit, a remarkable new 2.5-acre garden on Belle Isle that will have its grand opening Aug. 28—with its duly vaccinated creator in attendance, COVID travel restrictions permitting.

The newly planted garden is in the island’s cultural center, between the Nancy

Brown Peace Carillon and the Remick Band Shell, overseen by both the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory and the silent freighters sliding along the island’s south shore.

Unfortunately for the Garden Club, that was not the location they’d carefully cleared with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which



Oudolf is best known in this country for New York’s linear High Line, and Lurie Garden in Chicago’s Millennium Park.

administers Belle Isle, now a state park. Organizers had won permission for Oudolf to build his garden on the island’s western tip at Sunset Point, where the club has been engaged in beautification efforts since 2016.

But when driving the Dutchman around Belle Isle on his first visit to Detroit in April 2017, as they crossed the bridge leading to the Conservatory and the Peace Carillon, Oudolf burst out: “Stop here! This is where I want to make my garden in Detroit.”

Oudolf, who says he pickhis sites

PLANTING WITH A PLAN ... AND PAINT

The Belle Isle garden was planted by a small army of socially distanced Oudolf Garden volunteers last August and October—all 26,000 perennials and 48,000 spring bulbs. The team followed Oudolf’s meticulous, color-coded plan that Chicago plantsmen Roy Diblik and Austin Eischeid transferred onto the bare dirt in bright spray paint.

“Piet said we did the planting better than the Swiss,” said Duncan Campbell, Maura’s husband and the fellow who handled the undertaking’s complex logistics. “And that garden was mostly planted by pros, while ours was mostly volunteers. So that was big praise from him.”

Any garden put in just the previous autumn will inevitably be a bit sparse the first year. So it’s worth asking: When will Oudolf Garden Detroit really start looking like something? Diblik promises it’ll be



Oudolf’s garden design has helped make the High Line one of New York City’s most-visited attractions. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of the High Line.

by intuition, is both the foremost evangelist and practitioner of what has come to be called the Dutch Wave or New Perennialism, a garden-design movement launched 30 years ago in part at gatherings Oudolf and his wife, Anja, hosted at their nursery in the Gelderland village of Hummelo.

The ideology eschews traditional mass plantings, common to English and French gardens, in favor of a radical naturalism that more closely mimics actual meadows. The movement places a premium on deep research of native species, cultivating little-known wild plants and creating a tableau of combinations that—as MaryCarol Hunter, a University of Michigan professor of landscape architecture, puts it—“play well together.”

The key is creating a landscape that provides visual interest year round—from early summer’s glorious blooms to the dead stalks and spent seed pods that remain through the cold, dark months and create a sculptural aesthetic all their own. All of it only enhanced by a dusting of snow.

“Oudolf understands the importance of designing for the changing seasons,” said architect Alan Cobb, president and CEO of Albert Kahn Associates in Detroit and a big admirer. “As a result, his work is stunning in the spring, summer, fall and winter.”

Oudolf himself has noted that sometimes you just have to help people along to “discover the beauty in things that at the first sight are not beautiful.”



Oudolf Garden Detroit and its neighbor—the Albert Kahn-designed Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory—comprise an ideal destination for visitors.



Chicago's Lurie Garden sets up a striking contrast with the urban cliff of steel, glass and stone looming just beyond Millennium Park.

a handsome sight late this summer, just in time for its inauguration. But thereafter it will improve and fill out until all the grasses and perennials reach full maturity by 2024 or so.

“Some plants are slower than others,” Diblik said of the 154 types represented, almost all drawn from Midwestern native species. “So it might not be as well-coordinated this year as it will be in a year or two.”

Here’s the bottom line: By snagging itself an Oudolf garden, Detroit has joined a very select club, indeed. The Dutchman’s public works in this country—he has also done private gardens—are limited to Chicago’s Lurie Garden, the Delaware Botanical Garden, the garden at Manhattan’s Battery Park and the High Line. In Europe, Oudolf has done extensive work in England, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.

Asked what he thinks are some of his most noteworthy European designs, Oudolf ticks off Maximilian Park

in Berlin; the small Perennpark in Skärholmen, a Stockholm suburb; and the garden at the cancer support agency Maggie’s Centre in Sutton south of London.

In both in size and design, Oudolf Garden Detroit’s closest cousin on this continent is probably Lurie Garden, a 2.5 -acre prairie stitched together with species of native grasses and flowers that once blanketed much of Illinois. Its beauty and elegant disorder is juxtaposed with the park’s highly reflective, massive “Cloud Gate”—or “Bean”—and

the modernist precision of architect Renzo Piano’s contemporary-art addition to the Art Institute of Chicago. In a nice touch, the garden is canted at a subtle angle to make it all the more readable from the viewing platform atop the new wing.

All in all, it makes for an immensely satisfying urban retreat.

Blair Kamin, a former architecture critic at the *Chicago Tribune*, is a big fan.

“Millennium Park is charged with energy by the objects within it—most notably the ‘Cloud Gate,’” he said.

“The garden stands in sharp contrast to the activity of downtown and the rest of the park, creating this serene oasis of plantings in the middle of this energized cultural landscape.”

Writer Barbara Mahany, also once at the *Tribune*, put her finger on it when she famously compared Lurie’s design to an “Impressionist painting,” a characterization that will apply in equal measure to the Detroit



Lurie Garden reimagines a highly diverse prairie meadow.



The High Line designers renovated a long-abandoned rail spur on Manhattan's lower west side. The elevated park opened in 2009. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of the High Line.

garden.

One of Oudolf's techniques is to drizzle accent plants through parts of his meadows that will poke up through the grasses. "His style of planting, which he mimicked in Detroit, was irregular plantings of block patterns—more oval and wiggly than geometric," Diblik said. "But they're still in blocks and groups, and the blocks are tied together by little scatter plants—kind of like grout."

Pushing the art metaphor a little further, this has led some to compare Oudolf's approach to pointillism, the Impressionist method that employed thousands of color dots to create a unified whole.

Kamin also has nothing but praise for what's easily Oudolf's most famous U.S.

project: the plantings he installed on the High Line, the elevated, abandoned rail line on the west side of lower Manhattan. Resurrected starting in 2009 by the architectural firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the result is a strikingly gorgeous 1.45-mile linear park running 30 feet in the air from West 34th Street down to Gansevoort Street in the old



Oudolf integrated train tracks into his High Line design. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of the High Line.

meatpacking district.

"It's a wonderfully inventive reuse of industrial-era infrastructure," Kamin said. "Yet it's almost a victim of its own success. It's so crowded with tourists. But it's still a wonderful promenade. It's hard to imagine New York without it now."

In time, it might be hard to imagine Belle Isle without Oudolf Garden Detroit. The designer would certainly like that, since he has been dazzled by his trips to the Motor City.

"When I came over, I was in love," Oudolf said. "The people who invited me were great, and the people I met were great. In many ways, Detroit looked to me like a small community, and it made me feel at home."

The feeling seems to have been mutual "Piet's just the kind of person I like—without airs," said Jean Hudson. "He struck it off with everyone here."

There are, as it happens, geographic limits to where Oudolf will design a garden—basically, no farther south than Philadelphia, where he's just starting work on a garden for the Calder Museum.

"I don't work in another climate I'm not used to," Oudolf said. "I've been asked several times to do work in California,

HOW YOU CAN HELP

To donate to or participate in the “Sponsor a Plant” program, visit OudolfGardenDetroit.org. Itching to weed for a good cause? Click on the “Get Involved” button and sign up for activities ranging from garden maintenance to fundraising.

but I don’t have a network there, and I would have to study again for what plants would grow.” Learning the botany of a foreign climate, where virtually everything is new and strange, would be a staggering order. “And my office,” he added, “is just me and my wife, and nothing more.”

FLOOD OF GOOD FORTUNE

The Detroit garden, as fate would have it, benefited from one tremendous stroke of luck: From May 2019 through July, parts of the city, including Belle Isle, periodically flooded, including about a third of the proposed garden area—all a consequence of record-breaking water levels across the Great Lakes. Happily, the flooding started before groundbreaking to prepare the earth for planting in 2020.

“Piet was back in August,” said Duncan Campbell, “and could see what had happened on the site. So he went back to the drawing board and completely redesigned the garden.”

The project was moved farther inland and then raised three feet above the 100-year flood plain. A gravel layer 12 inches deep was installed underneath to facilitate drainage, and the rain garden plans were rejiggered to better accommodate runoff from the new design.

All of which, of course, boosted the cost. In total, the garden’s construction

and plantings cost north of \$2.5 million, while an additional \$2 million has been raised for an endowment to fund maintenance and upkeep. Over 50 percent of donations to the garden were under \$100. Donors have included private individuals, garden clubs and community groups as well as foundations.

In a year that’s had little to celebrate, the successful launch of Oudolf Garden Detroit is cause for jubilation. In Chicago, native Detroiter Lisa DiChiera, director of advocacy for the nonprofit historic-preservation group Landmarks Illinois, still can’t get over the sheer “sexiness” of having one of the most famous landscape designers in the world do a major project in Detroit. She can’t wait for visitors at the Aquarium and Conservatory to stumble upon the garden and find themselves bedazzled, encountering what she calls “this incredible new feather in Detroit’s cap.”

Michael H. Hodges’ most recent book was Building the Modern World: Albert Kahn in Detroit.



The 1941 International Peace Memorial—celebrating friendly relations between the U.S. and Canada—complements the northern edge of Oudolf Garden Detroit.