

## **DESIGN: EXPLORING PIET OUDOLF'S ARTFUL RANDOMNESS IN WESTERN GARDENS**

**Text and Photos by Maggie Lee**

In October 2000, I ventured to France, southwest of Paris, to Chateau de Courson for the Journées des Plantes. Dutch plantsman and designer Piet Oudolf was a featured speaker. During his slide presentation, he reminded, “Create the spontaneous feeling of plants in Nature ... re-create the emotion.”

Inspired, I began exploring and experimenting with Piet’s design matrix, methods and planting palette, in hopes of understanding how they might be demonstrated regionally in the West.

Piet is a pioneering modernist, whose verve is woven into his immensely satisfying gardens, evoking atmospheres memorable and startling. They are like spacious, billowing waves - panoramic drifts with rich and luminous plantings. Grasses and perennials with sculptural presence retain their formative character while changing throughout the seasons.

The overall effect displays an artful randomness of varying densities, reflective of a wild meadow with a cultivated yet dynamic relationship between structural plants and supportive fillers. The foundation of the designs is established by the grouping of plants - fresh, innovative choices, melded with Piet’s signature mixture of contrasting shapes. Color choices may be bold, pure or from a softer tonal range further revealing a palette selection of great finesse, expressed in specific, often restrained selections.



Toward sunset, a clear light colors the Sangre de Cristos in rich earthy tones of crimson, copper and plum. Santa Fe sits on a high plains plateau, nestled amidst the foothills of these mountains, yet open to expansive vistas; awash in colors of olive-green, buff, sage and sienna – under fantastic cloud formations spreading across clear azure skies with ever changing light. Significantly, it is form, shape and texture that create a lasting impression of this terrain.

Our challenge is how to echo and celebrate this unique sense of scale and atmosphere throughout our gardens - so that they belong and create a visual cohesiveness. Experimenting with principles integral to “New Wave Naturalism” and “Prairie Perennial Meadows” (descriptive phrases for Oudolf’s style), we can begin establishing a sense of balance by choosing plants which retain a closeness to their ancestors, while attracting birds, butterflies and beneficial insects.

A primary directive in our cultivating practices is to improve the receptive capacity of our soils. This process is enhanced by the quality of balanced life force found in Bio-Dynamic compost. With this method the organic matter is more thoroughly digested, thereby influencing the formation of stabilized humus (the capacity of organic matter in ripened compost to store nutrients and moisture).

Good design is site specific. These meadows pictured here (in their first year) face east, south or west and receive drip irrigation 3X a week. Native, homeoclimatic and adaptive plant species comprise our palette.

The more familiar you are with the materials, the more successful will be the garden.

Our compositions are structured from six key elements: **Form, Shape, Texture, Color, Movement and Light**. We begin with broad strokes of a few reliable structural plants: grasses like *Miscanthus*, *Sorghastrum nutans* or *Andropogon gerardii* and perennials like *Echinops*, *Cimicifuga* or *Phlomis*. When these materials are planted in drifts (dependent on scale of commission) they help anchor the composition and establish character. Smaller strokes serve as intermediaries developing and supporting the theme, providing rhythm and pattern to the plant groupings. Subtle nuances, backlighting, layering, accenting or contrasting textures, shapes and colors allow the planting to really sing. Form and color lead the eye around the garden.

### FORM:

Use perennials and grasses that offer continuity and a sense of progression through the seasons – flower and seed heads may last into winter. Materials are listed by seasonal appearance.



- Spires/Panicles – provide rhythm, clarity; dynamic and eye-catching; can be used as a punctuation mark / in loose groupings; effective with grasses ~ *Calamagrostis acutiflora* x Karl Foerster, *Sorghastrum nutans*, *Schizachyrum scoparium* ~

Sun/Shade *Digitalis*, *Baptisa*, *Dalea purpurea*, *Verbascums*, *Liatris*, *Penstemons*, *Oxytropis*, some *Artemisia*'s, some *Stachys*, *Salvia juriscii*, *Veronica incana*, *Lavenders*, *Linaria purpurea*, *Agastaches*, *Pericarias*, *Perovskias*, *Alceas*, *Cimicifugas*, *Veronicastrum sibericum*, *Artiplex hortensis*, *Stanleya pinnata*, *Salvia Pitcheri*, *Zauschneria garrettii* and *Yucca*.

- Buttons and Globes – provide definition; concentrated color in summer; stand out against softer shapes of plumes and grasses; winter interest ~ *Alliums*, *Centaureas*, *Eriogonium*, *Scabiosa*, *Knautia macedonica*, *Phlomis*, *Salvia verticillata*, *Echinops* and *Monarda*.

- Plumes - provide transition /fill between Spires and Umbels; effective en masse ~ *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, *Pennisetums*, *Sesleria autumnalis* and *Miscanthus* ~ *Amorpha canescens*, *Salvia plumosa*, *Filipendula*, *Thalictrum*, *Macaleya cordata* and *Solidago*.

- Umbels – provide a gentle naturalism; winter interest; “Most effective wildflower spectacles and garden plantings often have the combination of these two shapes as the central dynamic” (Piet Oudolf : *Designing with Plants*, p.45, *Combining Forms* – an indispensable book for working out this style) ~

*Anthriscus sylvestris* Ravenswing, bronze *Foeniculum*, *Angelica sylvestris*, *Patrinia scabiosifolia*, *Achillea*, taller *Origaniums*, some *Euphorbias*, *Sedums* and *Eupatorium purpureum*.

- Daisies – concentrated versions of Umbels; combine definition with softness; some hold form for winter interest ~

*Echinacea*, *Tanacetum niveum*, *Gaillardia*, *Thelesperma filifolium*, *Catananche caerulea*, *Berlandiera lyrata*, *Machaeranthera tanacetifolia*, *Argemone polyanthemos*, *Rudibecka*, *Ratibida pinnata*, *Asters* and

## Heleniums.

● Curtains – provide more natural look by enhancing play of light and motion; used for layering , offer depth, perspective, surprise; weavers; airy see-through plants can provide feeling of spaciousness. ~ California Poppies, Dianthus carthusianorum, Nigella, Amsonia, Thalictrum, Gaura lindheimeri, Verbena bonariensis and some Coreopsis ~ Stipa gigantea and other Stipas, Sporobolus heterolepis, Pennistiums, Panicums, Eragrostis trichodes and Molinas.

**SHAPE:** Especially relevant to foliage; linear contrast as in irises and grasses can link seasons. Useful in front and middle areas; bold leaves as punctuation; useful in repetition creating rhythm - Bergenisas, Euphorbias and Glauciums.

**TEXTURE:** Most appreciated at close view and in softer light. Shiny, matte, pleated and puckered, furry, variegated.

### **COLOR:**

Study wild plant associations for cues and subtleties. Spirit and atmosphere reflected in warm/cool motif. Link between architecture and garden. Theme; grouping related colors/complementaries; density; luminosity; repetition/pattern/rhythm. With the intensity of light in the southwest, use of sumptuous baroque backdrop with saturated colors of plum, burgundy, burnished clarets/bronze.

### **MOVEMENT:**

Dynamic of sound from grasses and bamboo. Sensitive response to air; carries fragrance. Calming, energizing, cooling. Grasses en masse create pattern of waves, spaciousness.

### **LIGHT:**

Ephemeral qualities create drama/soft subtlety; animate movement. Attentive siting makes most of medium; backlighting of strong colored leaves/stems, grasses give effect that glows and shimmers. Transparent quality found in Foeniculum, Thalictrum, Papaver, Gaura, loose Asters.



Grasses provide the foundation of wild plant communities and a textural, transitional link to the locale. They are adaptable with a long season of interest. Allowing generous space when planting will feature their forms. Repeating specimens with a strong shape creates a more formal look. In nature and garden, weave neighboring plants into a harmonious, relaxed unity; restful and luminous; rhythm.

This is a garden style for those who find Pleasure in enjoying the intrinsic Beauty of Nature and her seasonal changes. Expressed metaphorically through our gardens – the beauty in the looking and the beauty in the seen connect.

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*Whatever the style in romancing the regional, our essential aim is creating a visual  
cohesiveness –  
a setting at ease with its surrounding. By thoughtful design, thorough cultivation and resilient  
plant palette, we marry inspiration with sustainability.*