

## THE ARTISTRY OF PIET OUDOLF DESIGNING SPONTANEITY

*Text and Photos by Maggie Lee*

In October 2000, I flew to Paris and drove southwest to Chateau de Courson for the Journées des Plantes, a plant fair established in 1983, where nurseries showcase new plants and varieties, selling them in a lovely, park-like French setting.

Dutch plantsman and designer Piet Oudolf was a featured speaker and it was exhilarating to meet him. Piet had a grand stature, warm presence, beautiful smile and generous spirit. During his presentation, one of his remarks nested in me. “Create the spontaneous feeling of plants in Nature ... recreate the emotion.” As I listened to Piet speak and viewed his slides, his artistry and knowledge of plants and pollinators resonated with me.

### Hummelo

Piet worked as a garden designer for six years in coastal Holland before moving inland in 1981, with his wife Anja and their two sons to the quiet village of Hummelo. There on three acres, they established their nursery and began collecting, growing and experimenting with plants. They preferred flower shapes with strong form and structure; resilient, long-flowering perennials that retained a wild character. Grasses were a key plant group in their selections, as they provide the foundation of native plant communities. Their collection was a departure from the more traditional ornamental plantings found throughout European gardens during this time. In 1983, on the last weekend in August, the Oudolf’s held their first Open Day plant sale at Hummelo. By 1997, the Open Day’s transitioned to Grass Day’s. From this early phase of observing and learning “what these plants do,” the Oudolf’s developed an innovative palette of herbaceous perennials and grasses with a sculptural presence, which soon became a distinctive feature in his designs for prairie style meadows .

As a contemporary garden designer, Piet is a pioneering modernist. From his European roots come a respect for structure and architectural details, formality, plant shaping and a sophisticated plant palette.

**Sidebar** “Piet added a novel twist to something familiar” - a remark made in 1995 by Roy Strong, an English art critic and gardener in the classic formal style. I love his phrase “wonky baroque,” referring to Piet’s reworking of the more formal plant-shaping in traditional gardens. Piet employs these techniques through subtle, asymmetrical structural details, which showcase the context of a site & emphasis backdrops, providing scale, viewed perspective and angles, contrast and mystery for his environments. By example, he features staggered blocks of yew or beech, that through their rhythmic syncopation, leads the eye from one side of the garden to the other. Or clipped undulating or curvilinear hedges displayed as backdrops, that may serve to echo or interpret the surrounding or distant landscape.

Piet's Dutch roots combined creativity with practicality. With this background as foundation, it would remain until 2002, when Roy Diblik, a prairie specialist, took Piet to Schulenberg Prairie in DuPage County, Illinois, that he fell in love with American prairie flora. Just at this moment, they were developing the design and planting at the Lurie Garden in Chicago. Within a few years and the eventual success of the Lurie Garden, a genuine interest developed internationally for prairie plantings as low-maintenance, wildlife-friendly style for urban areas.

The palette of Piet's lush meadows feature a broad habitat diversity which favor plants that romance pollinators and invite wildlife. He sites plants with strong structure and good character, that remain expressive from full flower through seed head, retaining form and texture for autumn and winter interest. Examples can be seen in *Asclepias incarnata* and *Echinacea pallida*. Drifts of plants spread in broad strokes accented with contrasting shapes, anchor his dynamic compositions. Weaving in smaller loose clumps of plants provide more intricate patterning. Through the layering and intermingling of scatter plants, in groups of five or seven - rhythm, complexity and diversity develop depth to the planting. Piet's stylistic oeuvre reflects his intuitive artistry at designing spontaneity. His techniques provide a subtle mirroring of movement and patterns found in the mixing of species all through wild plant communities.

**Sidebar** - description of Intermingling - scatter and filler plants- p. 254 & 288 **Oudolf Hummelo.**

Intermingling offers a new perspective of experimentation in how we combine plants -Piet started experimenting with this technique in 2000.

**Scatter plants** - "Individual or very small groupings of plants interspersed among blocks of plant varieties or through a matrix planting, breaking up the regularity of the pattern. *Baptisia Blueberry Sundae* used on small scale, adding a note of surprise. Distribution is somewhat random. Can act as links in a border, even unifying it. Introducing the addition of contrasting splashes of color and strong form for a short time, like the pop of *Papaver orientale* varieties - which later disappear. Early bulbs can be used in this way."

**"Fillers** highlight primary plants and generally are without striking form- are visually more quiet - lasting less than 3 months. Effective as drifts and in filling gaps early in the year. Might have good flowers and foliage, but not necessarily strong structure. Examples include *Dicentra spectabilis*, *Heuchera*, perennial *Geranium*, *Calamintha nepeta*.

Emerging accents of gentle and breezy grasses and perennials serve to soften and unify the planting. The overall impression displays an artful randomness of varying densities reminiscent of a wild meadow. His prairie meadows are experienced as dynamic living processes that change with the rhythm of the seasons, creating an ephemeral atmosphere and ambience. The time we spend in these places may influence our sensibilities to how we respond artistically in our own gardens. As Piet expressed, "create the spontaneous feeling of plants in Nature - recreate the emotion".

A remarkable feature of Piet's design work is the aesthetic balance between coherence and complexity. His familiarity and knowledge of the cultural habits of plants, facilitates his

profound designs. We can learn from this - the more familiar we are with the plants we choose to plant, the more successful the outcome. Piet emphasizes the importance of long term, qualified and knowledgeable maintenance of installed gardens and meadows, insuring integrity and continuity of design and intention. Naturally change, editing and spontaneity are embraced as the gardens evolve. The Lurie Garden in Chicago received a 10 million dollar endowment for doing just that.

Back home

Santa Fe, where I live, is perched on a high plains plateau, nestled amidst the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Range, with wide-open views. As the sun lowers and sunset comes, the fabled light of the region deepens the colors of the mountains to rich earthy tones of mauve-cocoa, copper and plum. The signature plants of this place, a palette of olive-green, sage, straw and sienna, accent the shape, form and finer textures of the terrain. The character of the land is complemented by the saturated blueness of the spacious skies. Animated, mercurial shapes of buoyant clouds grow luminous reflecting Earth's beauty, its atmosphere and intrinsic partnership with its surroundings.

As a designer, the challenge is to echo and emulate this unique scale and ambience throughout our gardens. We strive for a transition from garden to the natural landscape that is harmonious, yet features memorable accents of surprise and spontaneity. Our foundation in creating garden environments, is grounded in our cultivating practices and improving the receptive capacity of the soil. These efforts are optimized from incorporating **Biodynamic compost**. The principles integral to building compost from BD methods, consistently produce material that is more thoroughly digested, influencing the formation of stabilized humus (the capacity of organic matter in ripened compost, to store nutrients and moisture). This beneficial compost strengthens life forces in the soil, stimulates root growth and soil microorganism production, while promoting humus formation.

The visit to France inspired me to study and experiment with Piet's design matrix, planting method and plant palette. The question emerged - how can I demonstrate his New Wave Naturalism regionally, here in the West.

Given the vast scale of many of Piet's public garden commissions, it is possible to become immersed and engaged in an exhilarating dream-like freedom, while surrounded in a verdant place of great beauty. We may find ourselves refreshed from this experience of visual cohesiveness recalling other native wild places. Piet's generosity becomes evident, revealed in his remark from the documentary of his work - Five Seasons, "It is the journey in our lives to find out what real beauty is" and he expressed hope that his gardens are a guide into the future. As my friend John Lash reminds, "the memory of beauty endures".

Maggie Lee is an educator and proprietor of Terra Flora, a garden design company. [www.gardengaia.com](http://www.gardengaia.com)

The following plant list includes interior west natives, homeoclimatic plants (plants from similar climates), habitat associations and regionally adaptable plants. The materials listed under Piet's categories are varieties I favor, prefer and have planted. I have been influenced by an intimate observing of nature and by Piet Oudolf and Lauren Springer's plant palette. They are my regional adaptations of Piet's design principle matrix for prairie style meadows - **Form, Shape, Texture, Color, Light and Movement**. They represent the essential guide to understanding the fundamentals of plant architecture consistent to his design methods.

### **Resources:**

1. **Five Seasons:** A documentary on the work of Piet Oudolf by Thomas Piper (2017)
2. **Hummelo: A Journey Through a Plantsman's Life** (2015) by Piet Oudolf and Noel Kingsbury
3. **The High Line** by Piet Oudolf and Rick Darke (2015)
4. **Planting A New Perspective** by Piet Oudolf and Noel Kingsbury (2013)
5. **Planting Design: Gardens in Time and Space** by Piet Oudolf and Noel Kingsbury (2005)
6. **Designing with Plants** by Piet Oudolf (1999)
7. **Gardening with Grasses** by Piet Oudolf and Michael King (1998)
8. **The Known Maintenance Perennial Garden** by Roy Diblik (2014)
9. **Undaunted Gardener** (revised edition- 2010) by Lauren Springer
10. **Waterwise Plants for Sustainable Gardens** by Lauren Springer and Scott Ogden (2011)
11. **Plant Driven Design** (I wrote a review for Pacific Horticulture in 2009) by Lauren Springer and Scott Ogden (3rd printing 2010)
12. **Steppes: The Plants and Ecology of the World's Semi-arid Regions** published by the Denver Botanic Garden (2015)
13. website for the Denver Botanic Garden
14. website for Future Plants-established by Piet Oudolf and partners in 1998

The plants listed are applicable for sun or shade plantings and are **listed by seasonal appearance**. I have indicated by **symbols \* for sun and # for shade** for many of the species listed. Recommend further research and experimentation to gain familiarity with specific cultivation preferences for materials you choose to plant.

### **FORM:**

This category is essential to Piet's choice of plants for their character, structure and longevity. Choosing perennials and grasses that offer continuity and a sense of progression throughout the seasons – flower and seed heads may last into winter.

A few native shrubs that may be included for a sunny position and for a drier partial shade siting: *Jamesia americana* (WaxFlower) \* # (drier partial shade); *Cowania mexicana* (Cliff Rose)\*# (drier partial shade); *Cercocarpus intricatus* (Littleleaf Mt. Mahogany)\*; *Ribes*

odoratum and aureum, varieties 'Crandall' and 'Gwen's Buffalo' ( Clove Current)\* #;  
Ephedra minima (dwarf Joint Fir)\*; Prunus besseyi (Western Sand Cherry)\*; Holodiscus du-  
mosus (Rock Spirea) \* # ( partial to full shade); Kraschenennikovia lanata (Winterfat)\* (do  
not over water); Caryopteris x clandonensis 'First Choice' (Blue Mist Spirea)\*; Rhus glabra  
Laciniata (Cutleaf Smooth Sumac) var. cismontana;\* # (drier partial shade- can be coppiced  
as some varieties tend to sucker)

Spires/Panicles – provide rhythm and clarity; dynamic and eye-catching; can be used  
as a punctuation mark or in loose groupings; effective with grasses ~  
Penstemon (Beardtongue) augustifolis\*, cyananthus\*, digitalis\* Huskers's Red \* # ( light  
shade), mensarum\*, grandiflora \*; Baptisia 'Blueberry Sundae' (False Indigo) (light shade;  
Agastache rupestris (Sunset Hyssop), \* 'Ava' \*, 'Blue Blazes', 'Blue Fortune' ( Hyssop) \*;  
Digitalis obscura \* # (Sunset Foxglove) (light shade); Diascia (Twinspur) 'Pink Adobe' and  
'Coral Canyon'\* (light shade); Sidalcea malviflora (Checkermallow) \* 'Candy Girl' and  
'Elsie Heugh'; \*Calamintha nepata (calamint)\* # (light shade); Salvia Sclarea (Clary Sage)\*  
# (light dry shade); Verbascum densiflorum (Mullein)\*; Solidago ohioensis (Ohio Golden-  
rod)\*# (light shade); Veronicastrum virginicum (Culver's Root) 'Adoration', 'F. Roseum  
'Pink Glow'#; Actaea simplex (Bugbane) 'Atropurpurea', 'James Compton' #

Grasses - Koeleria macrantha (June Grass)\*; Helictotrichon sempervirens  
'Sapphire' (Blue Avena)\*; Bouteloua gracilis 'Blond Ambition' (Blue Grama)\*;  
Hakonechloa macra (Hakone Grass)#; Chasmanthium latifolium (Northern Sea Oats) # ( light  
shade); Schizachyrium scoparium (Little Blue Stem) 'The Blues', 'Ha Ha Tonka'\*

Buttons, Globes and Clusters – provide definition; concentrated color in summer; stand  
out against softer shapes of plumes and grasses; winter interest ~  
Aethionema schistosum (Stonecress)\*; Geranium (Cranesbill) cantabrigiense 'Biokovo'\* #  
(partial dry shade), magniflorum 'La Veta Lace \* # (Fern leaf Cranesbill) (partial dry shade),  
macrorrhizum 'Album'#, phaeum 'Samobor'#, (partial to full dry shade), renardii 'Philippe  
Vapelle\*# (part shade), sanguineum var. striatum' \*# (Partial dry shade); Allium atropur-  
purea,\* christophii (Star of Persia)\*, 'Mediterranean Belles' (Nectaroscordum siculum)\*# (part  
Shade), 'Millennium',\* rosenbachianum (Showy Persian Onion)\*, thunbergii 'Ozawa'\*, ur-  
sitanicum 'Summer Beauty\*'; Glandularia bipinnatifida 'Valley Lavender' (Plains Verbena)\* ;  
Amsonia hubrichtii (Blue Star Arkansas) \* # (light shade), jonesii (Jones Blue Star)\*;  
Monarda fistulosa var. menthaefolia (Western Native Horsemint)\*; Phlox paniculata 'Blue  
Paradise' 'Sweet Lara'\*#; Eriogonum umbellatum 'Kannah Creek' (Sulfur Buckwheat)\*;  
Scabiosa ochroleuca (Pin Cushion Flower)\*; Scabiosa columbaria 'Butterfly Blue' and  
'Pink Mist'\*; Scabiosa atropurpurea 'Black Knight' and 'Beaujolaais Bonnet'\*; Knautia  
macedonica (Pin Cushion Flower)\*; Origanum x 'Amethyst Falls', laevigatum 'Herren-  
hausen', libanoticum (Hop-flowered Oregano)\* # (partial shade)

Plumes/Spikes - provide transition /fill between Spires and Umbels; effective en  
masse ; winter interest~  
Salvia dorii (Desert Purple Sage)\*; verticillata 'Purple Rain' and 'Endless Love'\* # (light  
shade-protect from afternoon sun); Stachys byzantina 'Silver Carpet'\*# (Lamb's Ear) ( part

shade) \*#, daghestanica\*, monieri 'Hummelo' (Betony)\*# ( part shade-protect from afternoon sun). 'Silky Fleece' ( part shade-protect from afternoon sun); Salvia cyanescens (Woolly Blue Sage)\*; nemorosa 'Amethyst'\*; Salvia x sylvestris 'Dear Anja'\*; sclarea 'Vatican White'\*# (part shade) ; Eremurus hybrids (Foxtail Lily) 'Cleopatra'\*; Alcea roscea single 'The Watchman'\*(Hollyhock), rugosa\*# ( light shade); Dalea purpurea (Purple Prairie Clover); Perovskia 'Little Spire'\* (Russian Sage); Liatris aspera, ligulistylis, mucronata, punctata (Prairie Gayfeather)\*

Grasses -Nassella tenuissima \*(Mexican feather - can be invasive), Stipa pennata\* ( European feather -self sows more mildly); Sesleria autumnalis and heufleriana \* # (Moor Grass) (part shade); Fescuca 'Siskiyou Blue' \* # (hybrid Idaho Fescue) (partial shade); Atlas Fescue (Fescue Mairei)\*, Amethystina 'Superba' (Tufted Fescue) \* # (partial shade); Calamagrotis brachytricha (Korean Feather Reed Grass)\*# (partial shade); Pennisetum alopecuroides 'Viridescens', 'Ginger Love' and 'Moudry' (Fountain Grass) \*# (light shade); Miscanthus sinensis Kleine Fontaine, Malepartus, Morning Lights and Nippon \*# (light-shade)

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” (plumes and umbels) Piet Oudolf : **Designing with Plants**

Anthriscus sylvestris 'Ravenswing' \* # (Cow Parley) (light shade); Parthenium integrifolium (Wild Quinine) \*# (light shade); Achillea 'Inca Gold' and 'Marmalade', 'Terra Cotta', 'Walter Funcke' (Yarrow)\*; taller stonecrops 'Matrona', telephium 'Red Cauli' and 'Vera Jameson' (Sedum)\* # (light shade)

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

Melampodium leucanthum (Blackfooted Daisy) \* (do not over water young plants); Echinacea pallida\* #( light shade), paradoxa \*(Coneflower); Thelesperma filifolius (Plains Green-thread)\*; Gaillardia aristata 'Amber Wheels' (Indian Blanket)\*; Berlandiera lyrata (Chocolate Flower)\*; Rudibecka triloba 'Prairie Glow' and subtomentosa 'Henry Ellers' (Black-eyed Susan)\*# (light shade); Asters- Symphyotrichum frikartii 'Monch'\* , laevis 'Bluebird'\* , divaricatus - species and 'Beth Chatto' #, cordifolius 'Little Carlow' \* # (light shade); lateriflorum 'Lady in Black'\*# (light shade), oblongifolius 'Dream of Beauty'\* , 'October Skies' and oblongifolium 'Raydon's Favorite'\*; Vernonia baldwinii (Western Ironweed) \*# (protection from afternoon sun); Japanese Anemone hybrids # 'Honorine Jobert', 'Alice', 'Hapsen Abundance', 'Serenade' and 'Margarete' #

Curtains and Screens – provides more natural look by enhancing play of light and motion; used for layering and intermingling of scatter plants offering depth, perspective, surprise and spontaneity; weavers; airy, loose growth - effective as see-through plants to view what lies beyond - valuable for scale and perspective; can provide feeling of spaciousness. ~

Dianthus carthusianorum\*, Gaura lindheimeri 'Whirling Butterflies' \*(Bee Blossom); Limonium (Sea Lavender)\*, Verbena bonariensis (Brazilian vervain)\*, Sanguisorba officinalis

'Red Thunder' ( Canadian burnet) \*# (partial shade); *Erygium yuccafolium* (Rattlesnake Master)\* ; *Thalictrum delavayi* 'Hewitt's Double', *rochebrunianum* ( Lavender Mist Meadow Rue)#

Grasses - *Stipas*- can spread (Feather Grass)\* and *gigantea*\*; *Panicum virgatum* 'Heiliger Hain', 'Prairie Sky', 'Purple Tears', 'Shenandoah' (Switch Grass)\*# (light shade); *Miscanthus sinensis*\*# (light shade)

### SHAPE:

Especially relevant to foliage; linear contrast can link seasons as in Irises and Grasses; useful in front and middle areas; bold leaves as punctuation; useful for repetition creating rhythm -

*Dicentra spectabilis* Pink and White varieties, *formosa* 'Luxuriant' (Bleeding Heart) #; *Heuchera americana* 'Dale's Variety', 'Caramel', 'Green Spice', Silver Scrolls (Coral Bells) #; Oriental Poppy 'Patty's Plum', 'Helen Elizabeth', 'Karina' \*# (light shade); Peony *lactiflora* hybrids, 'Julia Rose', 'Sea Shell' \* # (light shade); *Glaucium grandiflorum* and *corniculatum* (Horned Poppy)\*; *Salvia argentea* (Silver Sage)\* *Echinops* (Globe Thistle)\* *bannaticus* 'Blue Glow' and *ritro* 'Veitch's Blue'\*

### TEXTURE:

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

*Geum triflorum* (Prairie Smoke)\*; *Pulsatilla grandis* 'Budapest' and *vulgaris* 'Rubra' (Pasque Flower)\*; *Eriogonum ovalifolium* (Buckwheat)\* (do not over water); *Papaver trinifolium* (Armenian Poppy)\*; *Salvia daghestanica* (Platinum Sage)\*, *Salvia jurisicii* (Yugoslavian Cut Leaf Sage)\*; bronze *Foeniculum* (Fennel)\*; *Erygium yuccafolium* (Rattlesnake Master)\* ; small shrub - *Amoprha canadensis* (Leadplant) \* # (light shade) and *Winterfat*\*

Grasses - *Briza* (Rattlesnake Grass)\*; *Festuca* 'Siskiyou Blue' \*# (light shade); *Muhlenbergia reverchonii* and 'Pink Flamingo' *Muhly Grass*\* (hybrid); *Sporobolus airoides* (Alkali sacaton *Pennisetums alopecuroides*\* #(light shade); *Miscanthus sinensis*\* #(light shade)

### 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; pattern, density, luminosity; given the intense light of the Southwest, choice of sumptuous, saturated colors of plum, wine and burnished clarets/bronze as backdrop

*Eschscholzia californica* (California Poppy)\*; *Papaver atlanticum* 'Flora Pleno' (Spanish Poppy)\*; *Papaver rhoeas* (Corn Poppy)\* # (light shade); *Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape' (OpiumPoppy)\*; *Asclepias tuberosa* (Butterfly Weed)\*(do not over water); *Sanguisorba menziesii* ( burgundy Burnet); *Salvia azurea* 'Nekan' (Pitcher's Sage)

Grasses - *Hakonechloa macra*,*Macra Albo-striata* (Japanese Forest Grass)#; *Festuca-Amethystina* 'Superba' (Tufted Fescue); *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Kleine Fontaine, Morning

Lights \*# (light shade); Panicums, \*# (light shade) Sporobolus heterolepsis \*# (Prairie Drop Seed) (light shade)

### **LIGHT:**

Ephemeral qualities create drama/soft subtlety; animate movement; backlighting of strong colored leaves/stems - grasses lends effect that glows and shimmers; transparent quality found in *Linum perenne* ssp. *lewisii* (Western Blue Flax), 'Narbonens'e (*Linum Narbonense*)\*; Papavers, *Amsonia*, *Echinacea pallida*, *Gaura*, *Sanguisorba*, *Thalictrum*'s, loose Asters.

### **MOVEMENT:**

Plants expressive response to air and wind movement, create atmosphere and ambience; dynamism provides spaciousness, agility, a safe feeling; spreads fragrance; calming, energizing, cooling. grasses en masse create flowing patterns of waves

Grasses, a stellar group of plants, define Piet's designs. Outstanding features are their sculptural form with a long season of interest - their adaptability and resilience. They unify a planting and provide a textural, transitional link to the native terrain. When planting, allowing generous space and/or siting for back lighting - will enhance and maximizes their form and features. Useful in creating mystery and perspective - looking through grasses at an entry or placed specifically in the garden for this purpose. In nature and garden, grasses weave neighboring plants into a harmonious, relaxed unity; restful and luminous

January 31, 2021