

Piet Oudolf

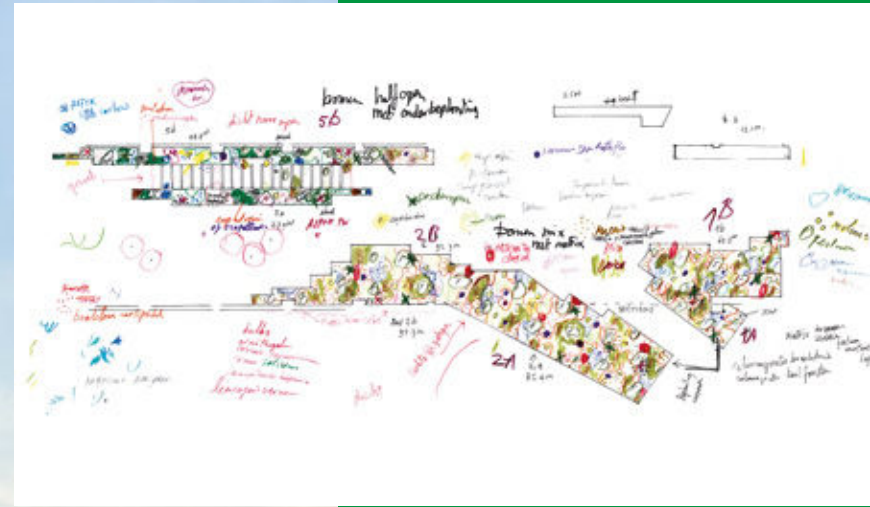
“Can we unleash a new green wave?”

Cities and societies worldwide increasingly look at nature as a source of intelligence, health and inspiration. In the 1980s, the famous Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf was one of the first to envision a new way of gardening and landscape architecture in the public domain. In symbiosis with nature and attuned to ecology he created healthy and sustainable plant communities. Today, his planting designs are celebrated worldwide, from the High Line in New York City to the gardens of restaurant Noma in Copenhagen - and recently he was awarded the Elizabeth Medal of Honour by Prince Charles. We asked Oudolf, nowadays also dedicated to inspiring and guiding the next generation of landscape architects, about the impact of his work, what we can learn from the world of plants and how we can unleash a new green wave of innovation worldwide.



Piet Oudolf

Noma, Copenhagen



High Line, New York

“I want my landscapes to make people feel something. I hope my designs touch them.”

“Back in the 70s, I started working in the family business”, Oudolf tells us. “But even as a kid, I knew I didn’t want to end up in the catering industry, like my family, so I started searching for something else. After taking on a couple of odd jobs and through various experiences, I ended up working in a garden centre. That’s where I – almost literally – got in touch with plants, which sparked a fire in me. I loved it and decided to stick around.”

From the very beginning, Oudolf wanted to bring something new to the scene of gardening and landscape architecture. “Back then, there was a completely different view upon plants from today’s views. The English, classical style of gardening was leading, which was very strict and all about rules to keep your garden under control. However, I felt like there was a need for more spontaneity and originality in our gardens – which to me meant, to use other plants than those which were considered ‘normal’. I wanted to redefine the ‘beauty’ of plants. Not only look at its colors or the amount of maintenance, but also its decay, character or the way it behaves under certain conditions.”

Letting go of control

“It hasn’t always been easy. Because, when we got started, it was different from what people expected.” This often led to questions, and especially in the early days, to concessions on Oudolf’s part. “Sometimes I had to choose whether I wanted to make a buck and be able to pay my mortgage, or create something I truly believed in. But I always had a pretty strong sense about what I wanted and there always was a certain amount of attention which gave me the reassurance that I was on the

right path and should keep moving forward in the direction I was going.”

“It was also really helpful that I wasn’t on this journey by myself. There have always been others who shared my vision and ideas, like-minded people who were on the same level as I was.” Together with Henk Gerritsen, Rob Leopold and Ton ter Linden, Oudolf was part of a movement called the New Perennial Movement, or ‘The Dutch Wave’. “We wanted to renew the status quo and envisioned a more natural and looser way of gardening. Instead of going against nature, it was our source of inspiration. And we started working together with the environment and ecology, taking into account the quality of the soil, microclimates and its position towards the sun.”

Plants are like people, and vice versa

Through knowledge and know-how about plants, Oudolf and the New Dutch Wave were able to disrupt the classical ways of gardening, setting in motion a wave of innovation and growth. “Nowadays, it’s almost considered normal to grow wilder gardens, letting go of overblown flowers and embrace the ways of nature. But when we started this way of designing and shaping gardens, we had to seriously research plants, their characters and the way they behaved among each other in order to learn and show there was a way of gardening that could be better and more successful – both to people and plants.”

“For instance, we learned that plants, just like human societies, live in communities. We investigated their behaviour, and especially the way



“Instead of working against nature, it is our source of inspiration.”



Hauser & Wirth Art Gallery, London

they interact and collaborate with each other. We used that information to build healthier communities, without sacrificing the way they looked or its beauty. Through this knowledge, we designed gardens which lasted longer and, instead of tearing down, they grew more beautifully and successfully over the years. This brought a lot of joy to us, as designers, and to our clients and the garden’s caretakers.”

The meaning of green

Animals, plants, trees and even micro-organisms: biodiversity and nature are reclaiming an increasing share in our cities, societies and communities worldwide. Although to some the tendency is still moving at too little a pace, awareness raises about the beneficial effects of nature on our health and wellbeing, and governments and corporates are beginning to sense the urgency of applying more green in the designs of our cities’ live and work environments. “That’s what our garden designs have always been about. I believe – and it has been shown by research - that a garden and plants, like many forms of nature, can have an added value to the wellbeing and health of people both physically and mentally. A garden is a living force, capable of giving you some kind of feeling, where you can maybe experience a certain sense of harmony. It’s a form of art, which can have an emotional impact on you.”

“We wanted to disrupt the status quo and redefine the beauty of plants.”

With his gardens and landscapes in the public domain, Oudolf hopes to involve people in the world of plants. “Now more than ever we need to restore our connection with nature. Working with plants has always had a huge impact on me. I have always felt a strong need to work with plants, and to express myself at the same time, artistically. A garden offers me the opportunity to do both. This has provided me with so many insights and a sense of understanding, about the world around me but also about myself. I want to share this with the next generation – not only everything I know about plants, but also the beauty of it.”

The future of plants - and Piet

Currently, Oudolf is dedicated to guiding a new generation to take the next step in the world of horticulture. “People easily forget working with plants is very complex and having the right knowledge is key to creating a successful and healthy plant ecosystem. Over the years, I learned how important it is to have and work with the right information. Having the right people, work with

“Working with plants has provided me with many insights, about myself and about the world around me.”

the right knowledge, in the right context – that’s where we can really make a difference and explore what the future of plants could look like.”

“To be fair, I wouldn’t know what the next movement in horticulture and landscape architecture will be.” Will it be about letting go of control even further, moving more and more towards nature? Or will it be about technology? “Gardening and nature have always been two separate things, separated by the amount of control we keep as humans. I do think that we should do everything in our power to re-connect with nature as humans. Less control in gardens and the public domain might bring the two more together, but isn’t it too late for that already?”

“The future of plants is defined by our knowledge about them”

“Surely, technology plays a practical role, like for instance in watering systems, but I don’t believe this is where the next big thing will spring from. Horticulture and plants are and always have been a human affair, so naturally the future green wave will have to come from the next generation of landscape architects.”

Book tip

In his latest book, Piet Oudolf shares the work, vision and ideas that evolved from and throughout his career in horticulture. An ode to the place where it all began and which he still calls his home: Hummelo. Available in English and Dutch at bookshops and online.

