



GARDENING

Natural Impulse

DEBORAH NEVINS LISTENS TO THE TREES AND LETS THE LANDSCAPE DO THE TALKING

by Alejandro Saralegui

Nature Walk | Layers of box, hornbeam and yew loosely define perennial borders along a garden path. See Resources.

Q&A with garden designer Deborah Nevins

You've run a successful business for more than 25 years. Who is your ideal client?

Deborah Nevins: Someone who's open to new ideas, even if those ideas differ from his or her original vision. And directness: It's important for clients to tell you what they like and what they're looking for.

How has your gardening style evolved?

DN: In the beginning, I was intensely interested in plants, and I still am, but more recently I've been making spaces with trees and hedges, and exploring the tension between natural and man-made elements. At my own property in East Hampton, there is a real conversation between the designed and the natural.

When people think of gardens, they typically envision flowers in bright colors like pink, orange and red. You're known for defending green as a color too.

DN: Well, I love flowers, to tell the truth. One of my favorite roses is yellow, even though I don't use a lot of yellow in my gardens. For a project on Mustique, I planted a lot of natives, which have hot Caribbean colors. But when people say they want a lot of color in their garden, it means they're not talking about the essence of garden design; instead, they've gone all the way to the end of the project, thinking about flowers in pots and such.

Sometimes your gardens are deceptively simple, like nothing is there.

DN: That is one of my recurring goals. I was

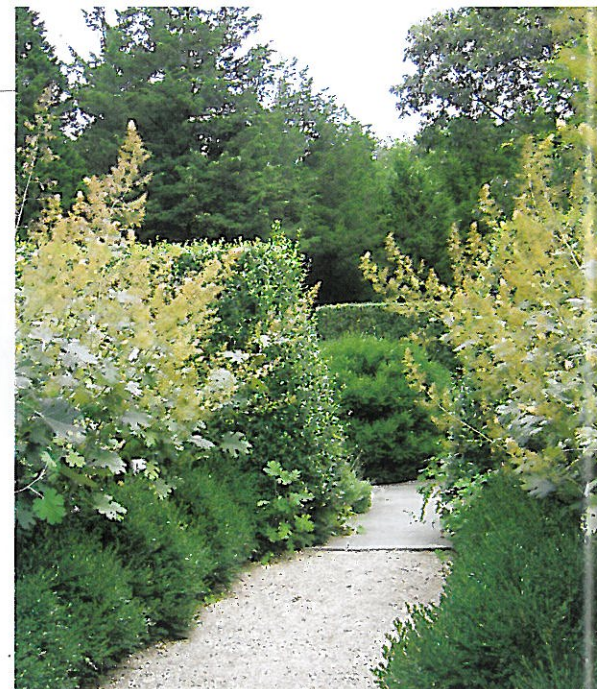
once asked what my design style is, and I said I don't do ugly. I just did a project with Renzo Piano, and the idea was for the house to appear as if it had just been dropped into the landscape. After all the construction damage, I re-created the native habitat there. It doesn't make for a very good photograph, but I don't care about that. I want to do the right thing.

Do you prefer gardening from scratch, or working on a property with a history to it?

DN: It doesn't matter to me, as long as the process is interesting. I just couldn't work around an ugly house—and I'm not really particular about the style of the house, either. The only thing I wouldn't do is a Japanese garden, because you can't do it unless you are philosophically attuned to Japanese culture.



Hedging Bets | Tall hornbeam hedges create a majestic backdrop for a simple lawn featuring a Lutyens Hestercombe bench (LEFT). Dramatic plumes of *Macleaya cordata* are reined in by boxwood (RIGHT). See Resources.



Your gardens can be considered very emotional, in that they are romantic. How do you create emotion in a garden?

DN: It helps to create intimacy in a garden, but there can be a lot of drama too. Mystery, surprise and change are important elements in garden design, and I like to use light and shadow to create subtle differences and a special feeling. I live near Central Park, and just looking down the street and seeing trees is a tremendous mood enhancer. I think of trees almost as people or spirits, in a way. At one new project, my clients have a great maple and a beech and five irregularly spaced chestnuts.

I'm going to use waves of shrubs and perennials to direct people through the property, making an interesting, special walk that highlights the trees.

What has inspired you lately?

DN: A Cartier-Bresson photograph that shows how landscape can create a more intense space for social harmony. I have another piece by an artist in California who hangs a pencil from a tree and lets the tree do the drawing. At the bottom she has the date, type of tree, its location and length of time the drawing took. It reminds me of the effects of time and environment on everything.

If you weren't a garden designer, what would you be doing?

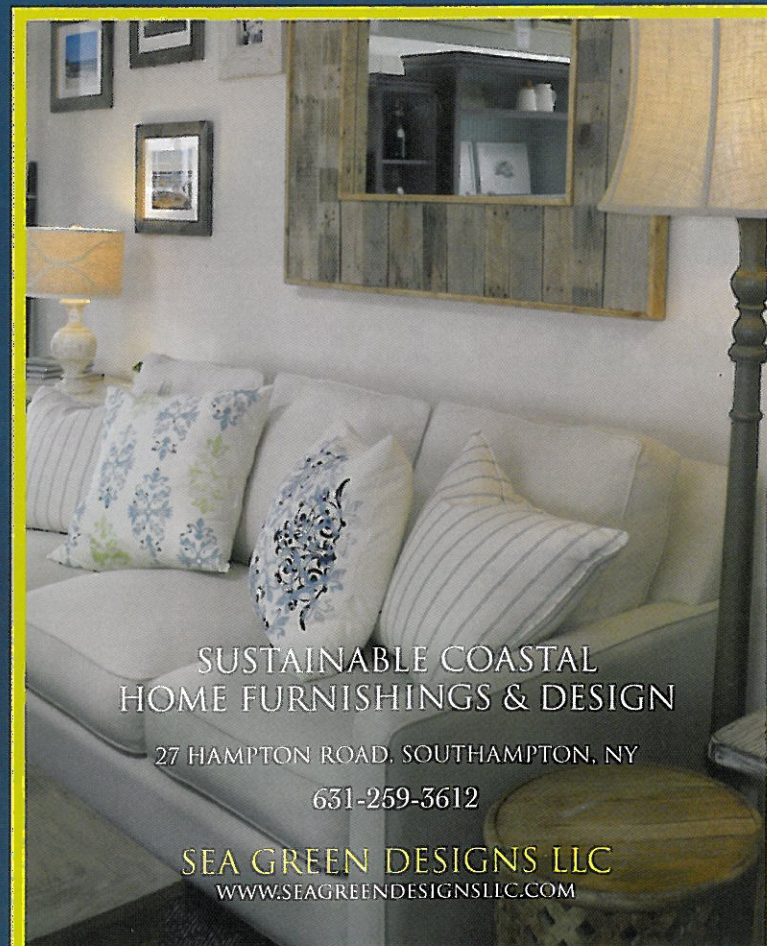
DN: I used to write about architecture, so I would do that, or maybe run a restaurant. I have visited and studied many important 20th-century buildings. I knew Philip Johnson and David Whitney, and their property in Connecticut is such a great example of the tension I spoke of earlier; they carefully cleared the woods, but the trees still speak to you.

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