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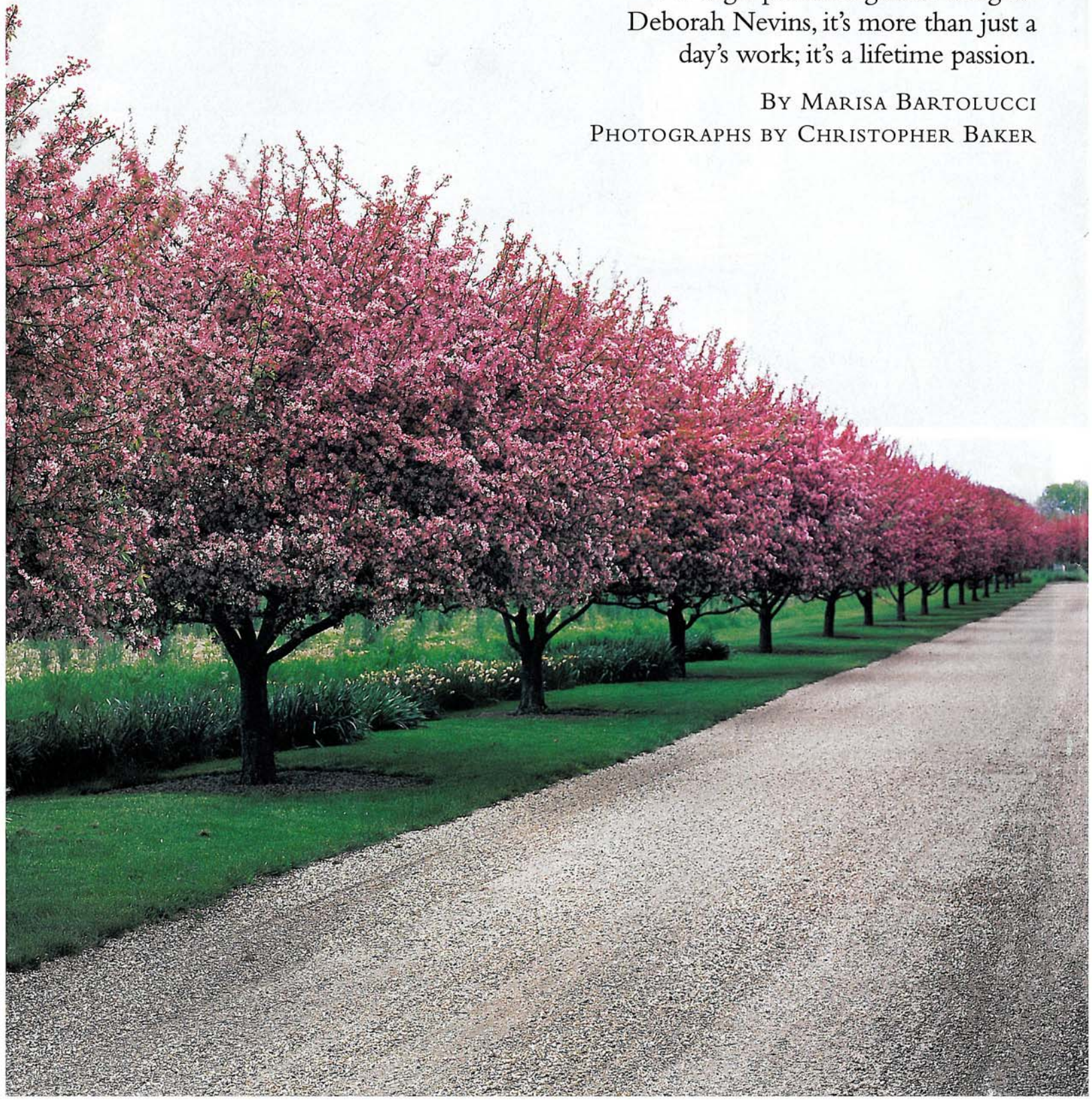
Blaine Trump

# REDESIGNING THE GREAT OUTDOORS

For high-powered garden designer  
Deborah Nevins, it's more than just a  
day's work; it's a lifetime passion.

BY MARISA BARTOLUCCI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER BAKER

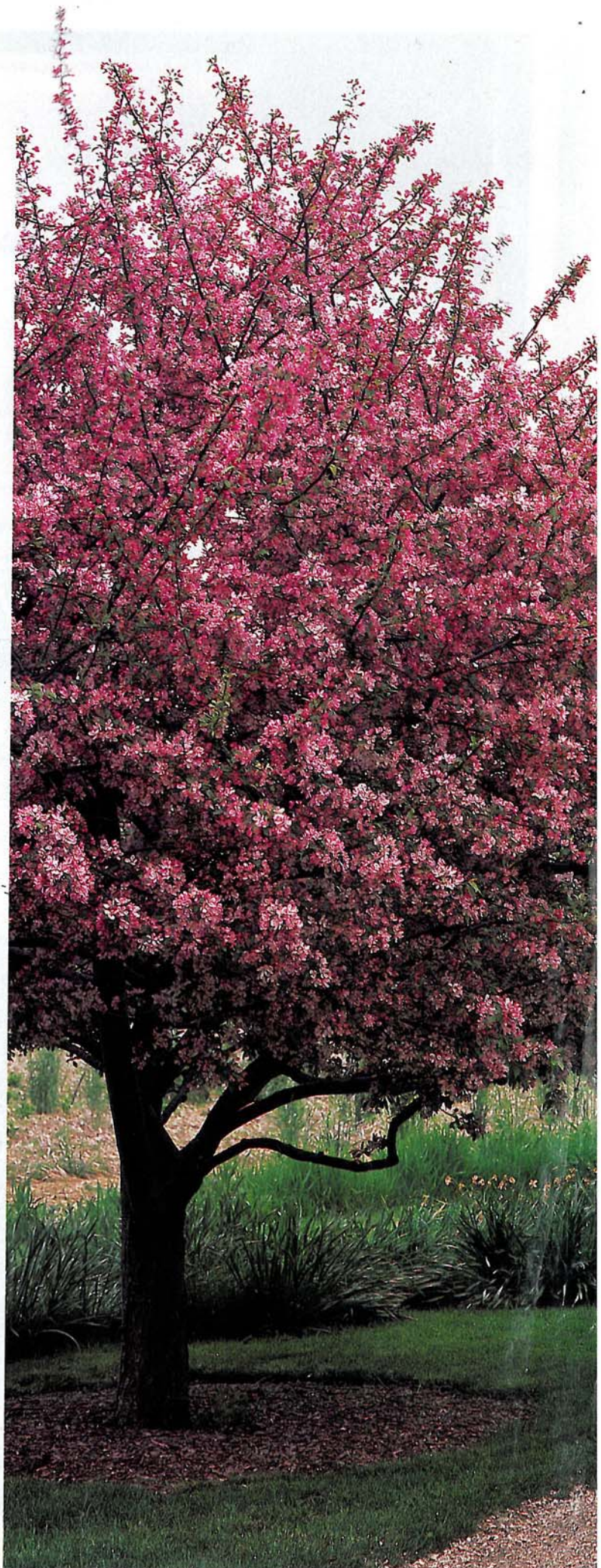


**G**reen fingers are a fact," Russell Page declared in his celebrated book *The Education of a Gardener*. "They are the extensions of a verdant heart." For an elite group of garden owners, including Henry Kravis, Rupert Murdoch and David Geffen, there is no heart more verdant than that of Deborah Nevins. In the thirteen years since she first plotted the grounds of White Birch Farm in Connecticut for publishers Peter and Sandy Brant, Nevins has become one of America's most sought-after landscape designers.

How did this petite, rather demure woman, born and bred in Manhattan and trained as an architectural historian, rise to gardening stardom? The answer is quite simple—through a passion for plants. Nevins doesn't hanker after the status of adding yet another powerbroker to her client list; instead she confesses to dreaming of someday weeding the gardens at Sissinghurst, the quintessentially English rhapsody of flowers, hedges and trees that has become something of a mecca for garden lovers.

It's this purity of passion, along with her highly attuned aestheticism, that has won Nevins the respect and affection of her very exacting clients and collaborators. "She's a kind of wonderful surprise package," says Chicago socialite Posy Krehbiel, a client of Nevins' and an accomplished gardener in her own

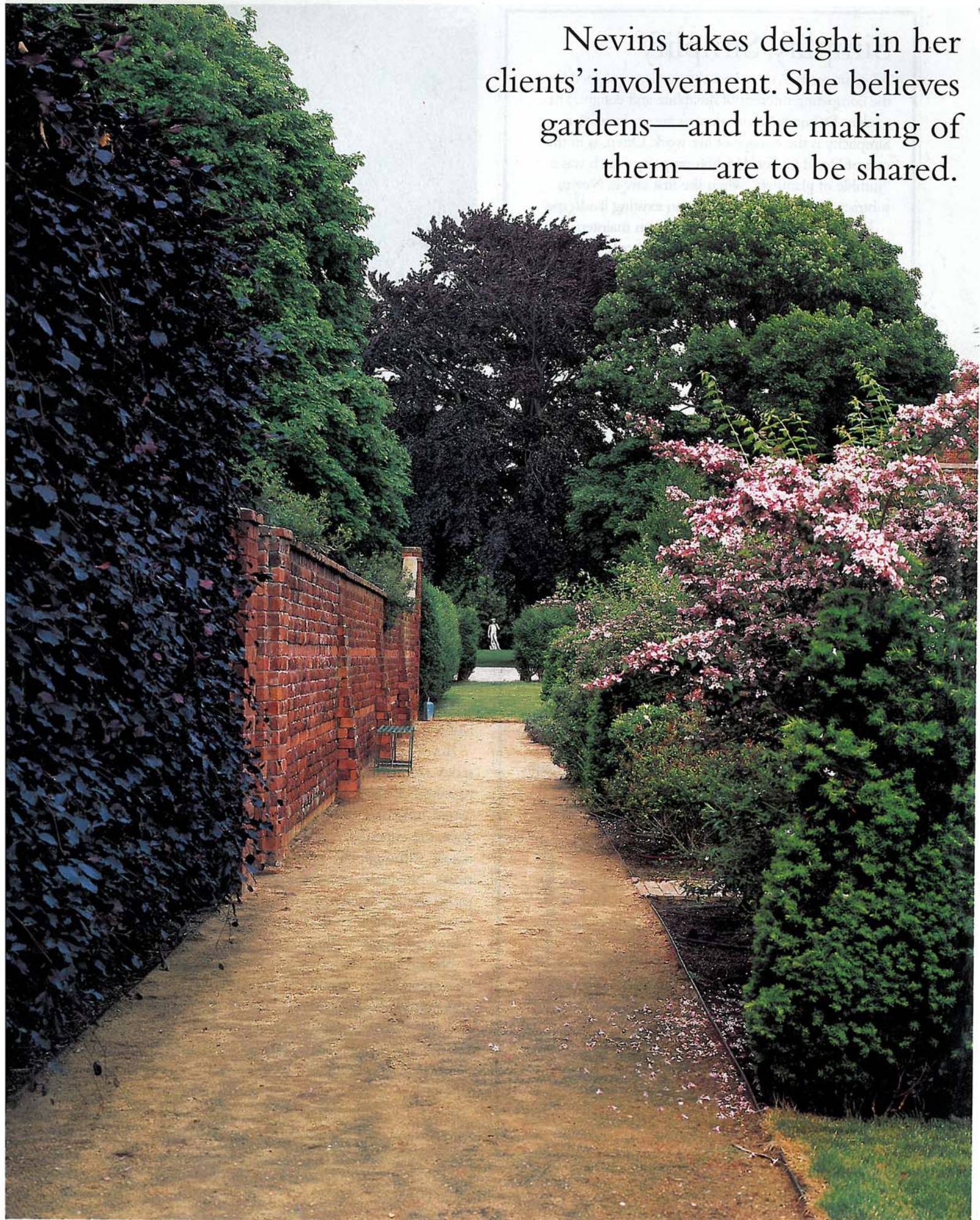
*Deborah Nevins (below) believes that the "bones" of a garden is what's essential—paths, hedgerows, a line of trees. The brief bloom of Liz and Damon Mezzacappa's floribunda crab allée in Southampton (right) is a spectacular bonus.*





*This page and opposite:  
In an art collector's  
Southampton garden,  
Nevins used buttressed  
brick walls, gravel  
paths and hedges of  
copper beech and yew  
to create vistas in a  
diverse plan. Nineteenth-  
century statues of the  
seasons reinforce the  
stunning views.*

Nevins takes delight in her clients' involvement. She believes gardens—and the making of them—are to be shared.



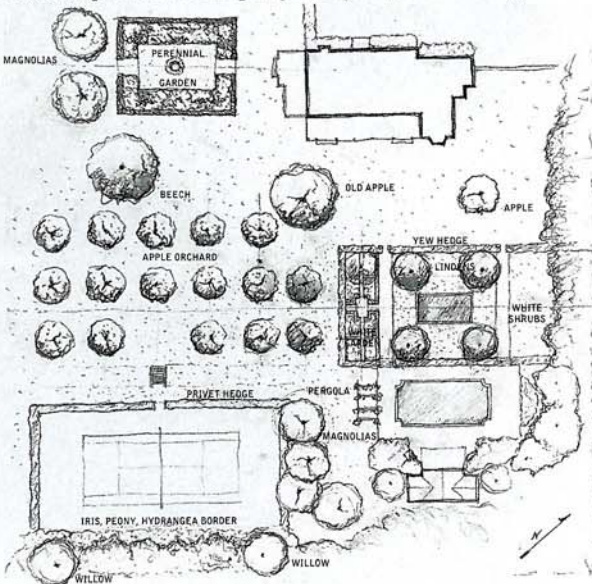
# Simplify, Simplify

All great gardens, no matter their style, are shaped by the competing interests of discipline and delight. The gardens Deborah Nevins designs are no exception. Simplicity is the essence of her work. Often, as in the case of David Geffen's Malibu property, which was a "jumble of plantings" when she first saw it, Nevins subtracts more than she adds to an existing landscape.

Keeping things simple cuts down on maintenance, though not necessarily on drama. For people with beach houses, she notes that indigenous plants such as bayberry, *Rosa rugosa* and beach grass, when carefully arranged, can make for striking statements. Nevins herself is "always on the run," so her own East Hampton garden is decidedly streamlined and easy to care for. It includes butterfly bush, boxwood, *Verbena bonariensis*, climbing 'White Dawn' roses, 'Sweet Autumn' clematis, a small red species of morning glory and moon vine. What gives the garden distinction and surprise is the pyramids of privet that border a sunken century-old greenhouse (with a sand floor and a fig tree "always full of figs"), which Nevins uses as a dining room. Here, as in so many of her gardens, architecture and greenery work together to great effect.

In fact, Nevins never stops emphasizing to clients the importance of structure in a garden, even the most informal one. Trees and hedges, paths and benches are what define a landscape, she says. It's because Nevins believes trees endow the landscape with a "special spatial sense" that she never considers the high price—especially for a beautifully formed mature tree—an extravagance. She still remembers the very expensive beeches she bought for one client. "I thought they were worth it," she recalls. "They looked like elephants' trunks."

*Structurally sound: Nevins' plan for Midfields, the Mezzacappa estate.*



right. "There she is in her little black suit, and you just tug a bit at the bow and all these ideas come pouring out."

Rose Tarlow, the Los Angeles *antiquaire* who oversees the design of entertainment mogul David Geffen's residences, calls Nevins "a dream to work with." In addition to her refined taste, says Tarlow, there is the fact that Nevins never lets her ego get in the way of the creative process. "If you don't like an idea, she always has twenty more," confirms Frances Blair, Christie's Midwest director, who is both a client and a friend.

But while Nevins may be amenable to different visions, she's quite adamant about what will work and what won't. High-powered clients and architects alike trust her exacting eye and sound judgment; they respect the fact that she has the assurance, the experience and the knowledge to deal with them as equals. Although she is small in stature and can be reticent at times, Nevins is not the type to be pushed around. What's more, she approaches her work with such idealistic zeal that it seems impossible to find anyone, client or informed observer, who has a negative thing to say about her.

Nevins' knowledge of gardens—and plants—seems truly encyclopedic, an attainment enhanced by her extensive travels and training in architectural history (she studied at Columbia and has taught landscape history at Barnard). Yet her designs are never academic. They couldn't be. Behind her studious demeanor hides a quiet sensualist who can exult in something as simple and as redolent as the smell and touch of boxwood. Though she may look to the Alhambra's Generalife gardens in Grenada to better understand the play of light, shade and water in courtyard gardens, or to Provence for an unassuming detail ▶ 158

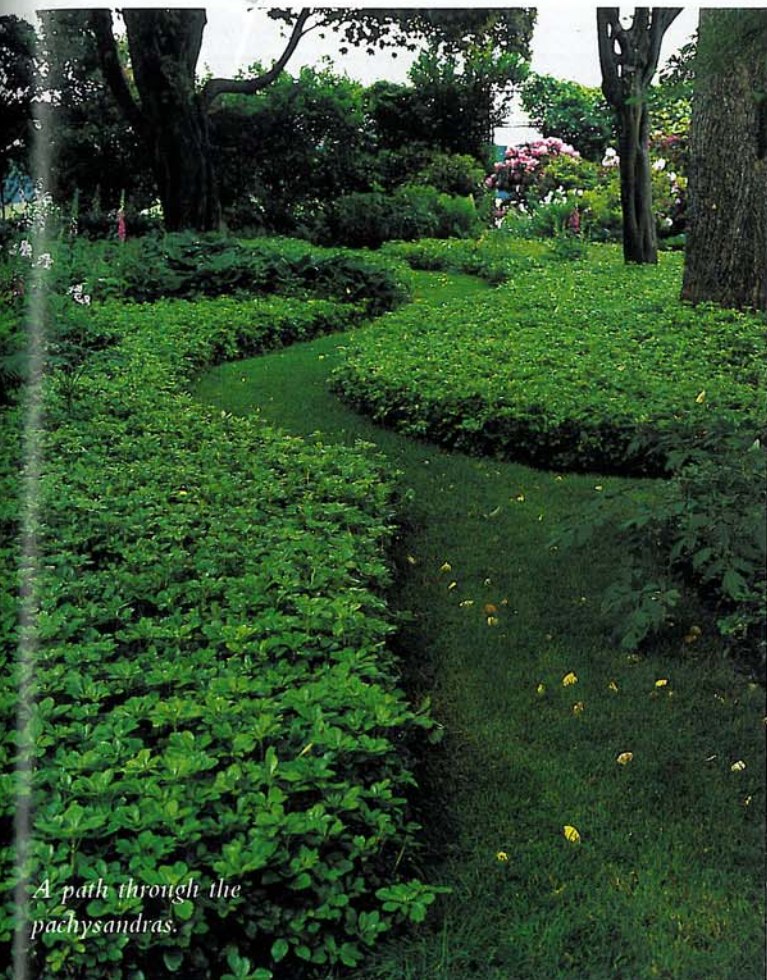


*Even the formal parterres of this Southampton garden (above) reveal Nevins' uncontrived sensibility, with 'Wargrave Pink' geraniums and lavender spilling out of the beds in casual, rosy clumps. Opposite: Copper beech trees form a tall hedgerow.*

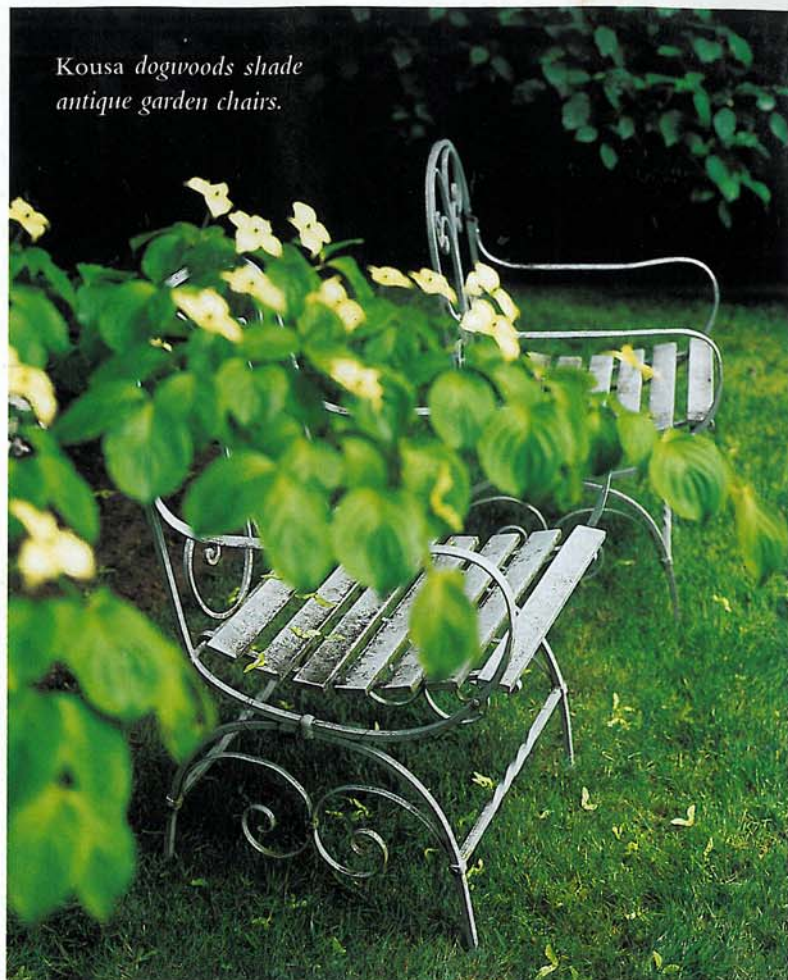


...ins feels that harmoniously  
posed outdoor spaces  
...a sense of intimacy and  
...sure that build a con-  
...tion between people and the  
...scape. Her woodland scheme  
...the Dauman garden in  
...Hampton (above and  
...osite) is a perfect example,  
...its undulating paths  
...ugh low, flowering beds.





*A path through the pachysandras.*



*Kousa dogwoods shade antique garden chairs.*



*A hardy 'Blanc Double de Coubert' rose finishing its bloom.*



*A century-old beech.*

# The Great Outdoors

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 158

in Southampton. Buttressed brick walls, copper beeches and yew hedges all give the plan dimension and depth. One brick wall, for instance, separates formal parterres from a meadow of wildflowers and fruit trees. At the far end of the garden, beyond the beeches, Nevins is currently putting together another "room," made up of Japanese maples, a sweet-gum tree and a reflecting pool. In the fall it will become a "fire garden," all red and orange leaves, a glorious vision intensified by its reflection in the pool.

The garden's owner has scattered benches and chairs throughout the grounds. The seating, he notes, is not there just for show. On the weekends, guests cradling books

HIGH-POWERED CLIENTS  
AND ARCHITECTS ALIKE  
TRUST NEVINS' EXACT-  
ING EYE AND RESPECT  
THE FACT THAT SHE  
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WITH THEM AS EQUALS.

can be found sitting in one part of the garden or another, enjoying the vistas Nevins has skillfully composed. The owner himself confesses to walking through the formal garden several times a day to savor how the changing light alters its mood. And it's here, in the early evening within a circle of yews, that he and his guests often have cocktails.

For many of Nevins' clients, the garden really does become an open-air suite. Shirley and Patrick Ryan consider their French classical garden outside Chicago an extension of their 18th-century-style manor house—a melding of landscape and architecture made possible by the early collaboration of Shirley Ryan, Nevins and Thomas Beeby, the designer of the house. From every window there are enchanting vistas, so that even in winter the garden contributes to the cozy pleasure of being indoors. Since the win-

ters are long in Illinois, Nevins found trees with beautiful webs of branches that, when stripped of their leaves, still adorn the landscape as natural sculpture.

Shirley and Patrick Ryan are great believers in universal design; that is, design accessible to a whole range of variously abled people. Both their house and their garden were conceived according to this principle. It was a new idea for Nevins, but one she took to with great enthusiasm and curiosity when she accepted the project. Consulting with a friend of the Ryans' who uses a wheelchair, Nevins created varied landscapes that would please someone with restricted movement. She also discovered an unusually stable paving material and came up with ingenious terracing schemes, so that all the different areas of the garden are accessible without steps (also a boon for gardeners with heavy equipment to move about).

While Nevins can create so expressively on a large canvas like the Ryans' estate, she can also do brilliant work in miniature, as in the courtyard garden she designed for Chicago-based Frances and Edward Blair. In this case, her work had to be spare yet powerful enough to stand up to the rather aggressive design of the Blairs' modernist brick town house. With a limited palette of box hedges, Boston ivy, climbing hydrangea, a locust tree, a fountain raucous enough to drown out street noise, and buff-colored flagstones, she composed an inner sanctuary that is at once inviting and complex.

Compared with many of her projects this was a modest assignment, but one Nevins embarked upon with characteristic enthusiasm. "It's the work she loves," confirms Rose Tarlow. "When Debbie takes on a project, she's there just for you," agrees Posy Krehbiel. "She has no airs. It's so refreshing to find that in someone, especially someone with her talent and expertise."

What makes for Nevins' commitment? Perhaps the Ryans' decorator, Englishman Stanley Falconer of Colefax & Fowler, put it best in his succinct appraisal: "She's a real plantswoman." ❖

## Shopping Information

**Page 102:** On Tiffany Dubin: Tunic (\$695) and pants (\$265) at Max Mara, NYC. Ring (\$350), necklace (\$2,040) and earrings (\$360) at Mikimoto stores. Bedding by Calvin Klein Home, at Burdines, Boca Raton; Dillard's, Post Oak TX; Macy's West, LA; or by calling (800) 294-7978. **Page 104:** On Alexandra Champalimaud-Schnitzer: Donna Karan jacket (\$1,600) and pants (\$695) at Macy's West, Hayward CA; Adeline Celine, Niles IL. Top (\$705) at Chanel boutiques; Neiman Marcus. Elsa Peretti ring (\$72,000), necklace (\$6,400) and earrings (\$165) at Tiffany & Co. **Inset:** On Alexandra: John Galliano skirt (\$1,300), shirt (\$1,370) and camisole (\$770) at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC; Fred Hayman, Beverly Hills. (Skirt and camisole also at Bagutta, NYC, and select Saks Fifth Avenue stores.) Ring (\$15,200) at Tiffany & Co. Choker (\$4,950) from Kentshire Galleries, NYC. On Annabel Schnitzer: Vera Wang gown (\$3,475). Earrings (\$165) at Tiffany & Co. On Eliza Schnitzer: Vera Wang gown (\$3,225). Both gowns at Vera Wang Bridal House, NYC; Barneys New York, Beverly Hills. On table: Sandals (\$485) at Manolo Blahnik, NYC; Neiman Marcus, Beverly Hills. Manolo Blahnik white satin (\$530) and floral-print (\$690) bags at Manolo Blahnik, NYC; Bergdorf Goodman. Vanity set (\$1,800) from Kentshire Galleries, NYC. **Page 105:** On Lauren Veronis: Tunic (\$395) at N. Peal, NYC, San Francisco, London. Kieselstein-Cord earrings (\$2,300), necklace (\$18,700), pendant (\$10,400) and ring (\$5,350) at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. On Perri Peltz Ruttenberg: Jacket (\$850), T-shirt (\$250) and pants (\$245) at Valerie Louthan, Palm Beach. Earrings (\$6,900) and ring (\$3,500) by Kieselstein-Cord, at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. **Page 106:** On Blaine Trump: Suit (\$4,085) at Chanel boutiques; Neiman Marcus. Top (\$705) at Chanel boutiques; Neiman Marcus. Choker (price on request) at Cartier boutiques. On Jean Beard: Suit (\$2,910) at Ungaro boutiques, NYC, Palm Beach, Bal Harbour; Bloomingdale's; Nordstrom, South Coast Plaza CA. Earrings and necklaces (prices on request) at Cartier. Pillows by Dolce & Gabbana. Shawl (\$750) at N. Peal, NYC, San Francisco, London. **Page 107:** Céline jacket (\$2,460) and jeans (\$330) at Céline boutiques, NYC, Bal Harbour. Watch (\$4,100) at Cartier boutiques. **Page 108:** On Evelyn Cunningham: Salvatore Ferragamo jacket (\$855) at Ferragamo boutiques. Angela Cummings earrings (\$1,900) at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. Platinum (\$2,350), gold (\$1,650) and pink-gold (\$1,500) rings by Temple St. Clair-Carr, at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. On Shanai Brown: Gianfranco Ferré pantsuit (\$2,415) at Ferré boutiques, NYC, Palm Beach, Beverly Hills. Tracy Watts hat (\$250) at Barneys New York; Fragments, NYC. Earrings (\$1,075) by Temple St. Clair-Carr, at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. **Page 109:** On Dayssi Olarte de Kanavos: Giorgio Armani suit (jacket, \$1,250; pants, \$650) at Armani boutiques, NYC, Boston, Beverly Hills. Oxfords (\$225) at Joan and David boutiques. Necklace (\$35,000) at Van Cleef & Arpels. On Pina Velandia: Ralph Lauren jacket (\$995) and dress (\$695) at Polo/Ralph Lauren, NYC, Beverly Hills; Mettler's, Sarasota. Pumps (\$375) at Christian Louboutin, NYC. Brooch (\$105,000) and earrings (\$58,000) at Van Cleef & Arpels.