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VOGUE

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green acres

Landscape designer Deborah Nevins tamed a woodland wilderness to create a series of green rooms that have transformed her house into a rustic palace. By Hamish Bowles. Photographed by Christopher Baker.



By the late nineties, the landscape designer Deborah Nevins had already established herself as a creator of thoughtful and sophisticated gardens for such high-flying clients as Sandra Brant, David Geffen, Henry Kravis, Rupert Murdoch, and Paul Walter. Nevins's background was scholarly; she obtained two graduate degrees in art history at Columbia, but when

(inspired by Elisabeth MacDougall's teachings at Harvard) she proposed a thesis on the history of landscape design, she was told that the subject was "not academic enough." She realized then that a life in the sequestered halls of academe was not for her. "Physically, I had to be outside," she explains, fondly recalling childhood trips with her mother to gather wildflowers.

Her schemes are subtly informed by her passion for gardens as varied as Sissinghurst and Ninfa; Kyoto's moss garden and John Fairey's Peckerwood outside Houston; the Mediterranean Garden Society near Athens and Edward James's surreal gardens at Las Pozas in Mexico; and the naturalistic park landscaping of Haga outside Stockholm and Geoffrey Jellicoe's Runnymede in England. Nevins cites Sissinghurst as the inspiration for the wondrous gardens she created for Paul Walter's Arts and Crafts Southampton manse, where Edwardian brick walls were connected to copper beech hedges, and plantings in the Fire Garden were conceived to turn blazing red in the fall.

So when Nevins set out a decade ago to find a plot of land on which to build her dream house and garden, the results were destined to be intriguing. The search for land that she liked and could afford, however, proved frustratingly elusive



EMERALD ISLE

A view across one of the flower gardens to the house. LEFT: The wild rose walk, with Mary Manners, *Rosa dumalis*, and Dupontii bushes underplanted with Claridge Druce geranium.

Sittings Editor:
Hamish Bowles.







RUSTIC PLEASURES

Philadelphus and Canadian columbine in an area of the wild garden; local sculptor Costantino Nivola made the trellis fence. OPPOSITE PAGE: Plume poppy grows through a bench.

until her realtor told her that every plot in the area she was considering (an unmanicured woodland on the eastern end of Long Island) had been mapped on a computer. She scrutinized the maps and discovered a two-acre parcel in a position that seemed ideal—and was undeveloped. She approached the landowner and was happily able to acquire it.

In the 1950s, as an elderly neighbor later recalled, cows grazed on meadowland here, but in the ensuing decades the land had been subsumed by a wilderness of spindly locust trees and thickets of untamed undergrowth, of brush and bullbrier. Nevins began to clear this away and was delighted to find stately trees long hidden in the tangle. These she preserved and used as anchors on which to center her house and garden design. Two red cedars determined the axis on the south side of the house. “I enjoyed working with the existing spatial configurations,” she says. “It really gave me pleasure to find what was there and structure everything around it.” On the house’s northern facade, Nevins originally coveted a courtyard, “but it was too expensive to build all those extra walls and roofs!” so she achieved the illusion with walls of privet hedge instead. The house’s entry here is aligned with a splendid oak that Nevins discovered lost in the crowded woods. At one end of this greensward, a thicket of red cedars stands sentinel, now cleared of the undergrowth and younger trees around them. “It was such a beautiful grouping that I had nothing to do but accentuate it,” says Nevins.

For the house itself, Nevins’s plans were modest—so much so that when a neighbor saw its foundation being laid, he asked why she was starting the project with the swimming pool. She wanted to create an environment that blended the honest-to-goodness local American vernacular with French traditions, with a particular nod to Jefferson’s Francophile innovations at Monticello. Working with architect Peter de Bretteville, she created a two-bedroom structure of singular elegance that belies its modest dimensions. Humbly clad in the white cedar shingle used for Nantucket cottages, it contains one pale, high-ceilinged drawing-and-dining room with tall three-over-three French windows that give it the air of an orangery (a purpose that it usefully serves when the garden’s Meyer lemon trees are brought inside for winter). No curtains hang at her windows; the carefully considered vistas beyond provide bucolic decoration of their own.

Nevins’s garden plan, with its geometric arrangement of high-hedged “rooms,” transforms her cottage into something altogether more palatial. Each of these garden spaces creates and evokes a different mood and atmosphere as you progress through them. “Because it’s such a small space,” Nevins explains, “the spatial separations make for a drama that keeps your mind active and interested.”

As soon as the foundations for the house had been laid, Nevins planted six sycamore trees outside the south front. “You have to be patient,” she says, and she should know; her hedges and constantly evolving plantings have taken nearly a decade to achieve their current stately grandeur. “I think if people had more patience, they could expand the beauty within their gardens.”

The sycamore planting was inspired by a visit to relatives near Cahors and by the view of the classic French village square beyond their windows, shaded by these romantic and practical trees. By pruning their upper branches, Nevins has ensured that the lower ones grow thick and healthy enough to provide shade for alfresco dining in the height of summer’s dog days. The formality of this terrace, with flagstone and stone dust underfoot, cedes to an expanse of grass beyond, enclosed by towering hornbeam hedges. The illusion of flower beds is suggested by areas where the grass is left to grow tall and wild; nestled here are the summering lemon trees. Beyond

this lawned enclosure is a privet-walled flower garden; Nevins didn’t want flowers near the house because, as she has said, “it would make me too nervous to constantly see everything that needs weeding!”

Nevins’s gardens owe their enchantingly naturalistic effects to her preference for species plants—*Rosa dumalis*, *Rubus odoratus*, and the native North American *Lilium superbum* are among her favorites. “What I enjoy about them is the simplicity of the plant,” she says. “As in nature, they have evolved on their own.” Through the seasons, these beds are touched with color: the deep magenta of the Charles de Mills rose or the palest yellow of a towering hollyhock or the dainty orange bells of the *Aquilegia canadensis* (Canadian columbine).

(Nevins’s research into the unsung women gardening authorities of the Edith Wharton era led her to Mabel Cabot Sedgwick’s 1907 tome *The Garden Month by Month*, with its exhaustive color-coding charts.) But the overwhelming drama of the gardens lies in its subtle play of green on green on green—an ocean of green with darker depths and eddying currents and pale sea foams—an effect that proves profoundly soothing.

The nuances of green continue beyond the formality of these garden rooms to the carefully controlled Rousseauian wilderness. (“I left all the woodland, and the hedge creates this scrim, you might say,” Nevins suggests.) However, even here the plantings are as carefully considered as in the herbaceous beds. Flanking one outer wall of hedges is a wild-rose walk, a bower that includes Mary Manners, *dumalis*, and Dupontii. Another woodland grove is headily scented with a collection of philadelphus (mock orange) bushes that Nevins adores.

A walk through Nevins’s garden is an adventure. In these “spaces of drama,” as she calls them, “you are on your own little journey all the time.” □



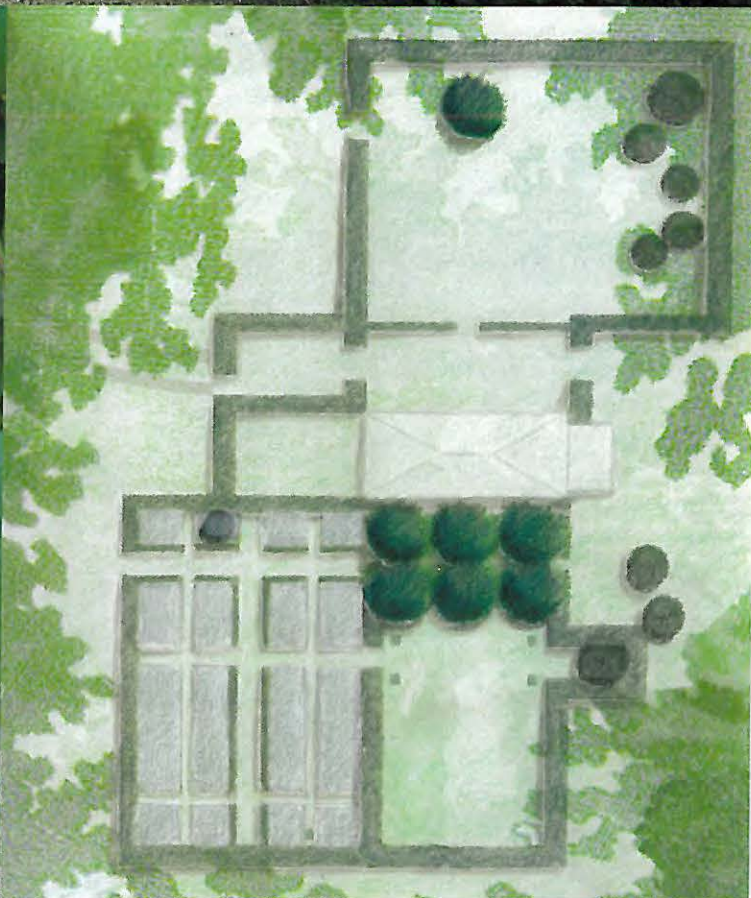
LAWN AND ORDER

Sycamore trees shade the south terrace. The lawn beyond is hedged in hornbeam.



FLOWER POWER

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: One of the gardens planted with hollyhock, *Lilium superbum*, boxwood, and a potted bay tree; Nevins's garden plan; Charles de Mills roses in the flower garden.







GREEN FINGERS

A corner of one of the gardens with foxglove, *Linaria*, and *Hesperis matronalis* Alba.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Meyer lemon trees nestled in unmown grass flank an opening in the hornbeam hedge.

contributors



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PHOTOGRAPHER

BRYANT PARK, NYC

“Shooting so many gorgeous women all at one time. In the past, maybe I’ve shot ten, 20 at once... this was 100!”

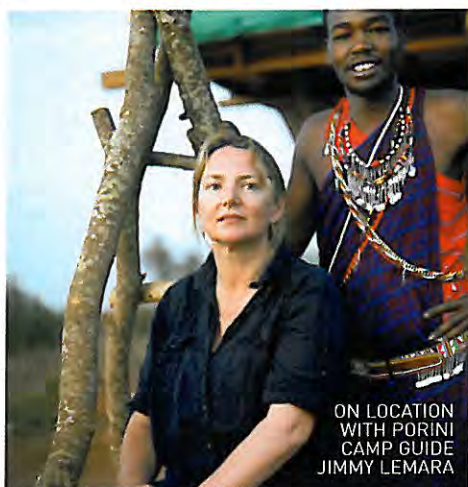
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EVE MACSWEENEY

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

“Seeing how modernity intersects with tradition for the Maasai.”

ON THE MOST FASCINATING ASPECT OF REPORTING ON ECOWARRIOR LEELA HAZZAH IN KENYA (“THE LION SAVER,” PAGE 236)



ON LOCATION WITH PORINI CAMP GUIDE JIMMY LEMARA

SALLY SINGER

FASHION NEWS/
FEATURES DIRECTOR

“I overcame my anxiety about riding through Times Square and discovered the exhilaration of crossing the city at midnight on two wheels.”

ON THE PLEASURES OF CONVERTING TO A GREENER LIFESTYLE FOR “SALAD DAYS,” PAGE 242



WEST VILLAGE, NYC

IN KENYA WITH GUIDE DANIEL LEMPARARIA



JONATHAN BECKER

PHOTOGRAPHER

“The quiet. The lions.”

ON THE HIGHLIGHTS OF SHOOTING ON ASSIGNMENT IN AFRICA (“THE LION SAVER,” PAGE 236)

DEBORAH NEVINS

This month landscape designer Deborah Nevins invites *Vogue’s* Hamish Bowles to her white cedar-shingled house and garden on

eastern Long Island (“Green Acres,” page 228). Nevins, whose love affair with flora began when she was a five-year-old picking wildflowers with her mother in Massachusetts, started her design firm, Deborah Nevins & Associates, more than 20 years ago in New York City. The firm has tackled such megaprojects as private gardens for Rupert Murdoch and Henry Kravis and a 50,000-acre ranch; Nevins is currently at work on a 40-acre park with Renzo Piano for the National Library of Greece, in which she is “trying to use plants that ‘speak Greek,’ like carob, Cretan ebony, and forests of arbutus.” For her own house,

Nevins collaborated with architect Peter de Bretteville to construct an orangery of sorts nestled among boxwoods, sycamores, and red cedars, of which her favorite part is “the mystery of not seeing everything at once. I am interested in creating spaces that encourage social interaction while choosing plants that echo the culture of the place.” Nevins is also working on a Colorado property that she hopes will prompt people to say, “How great you did not do anything to the land when you built the house.” I want the landscape to emulate the Aspen forest as much as it can. I want the design hand to disappear.”—GENEVIEVE BAHRENBURG



NEVINS IN HER LONG ISLAND GARDEN

Demarchelier: SARA McDOWELL; Singer: HANNAH THOMSON; Becker: Courtesy of Jonathan Becker; Nevins: CHRISTOPHER BAKER; MacSweeney: JONATHAN BECKER.