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Nevins on Gardens

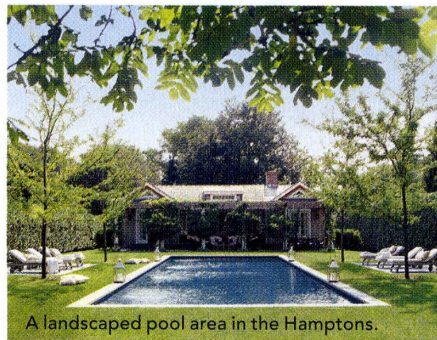
From her serene offices in New York's SoHo, Deborah Nevins conceives some of the most beautiful outdoor spaces in the world. She designs everything from townhouse gardens to baronial estates, and her high-powered clients include David Geffen and Ian Schrager. Her latest project: a 40-acre park she is creating with Renzo Piano for a new cultural center in Athens, Greece. Nevins prides herself on landscapes that are in tune with their surroundings. "The best compliment one can pay me," she says, "is to think I didn't do a thing." *By Ingrid Abramovitch*



Deborah Nevins.

AT HOME OUTDOORS

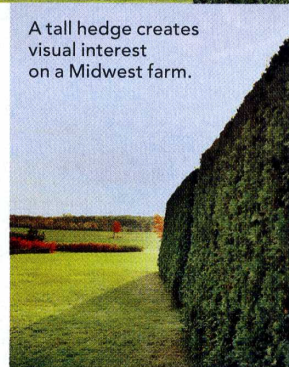
- People love intimate landscapes: simple but contained areas that act as a gathering point. A grid of trees, or a less-formal grove, can almost feel like a house, but one that is open to the sky and surrounding world. Even in a small townhouse garden I'll often add a platform for people to sit and gather.
- I love flowers, but landscaping isn't about decorating with flowers. What's vital is to create a sense of structure. A garden should relate to the space around it—to the architecture of a house or a distant view.
- One of my favorite "sports" in a garden is staring. It's like meditation or looking at art. You go to a garden to be still, to look at beautiful things, to be with people outside. There is a sense of freedom—that you're outside, you've been let out of prison.



A landscaped pool area in the Hamptons.



Nevins's own Long Island garden.



A tall hedge creates visual interest on a Midwest farm.

It isn't just about beautiful flowers. When you create a landscape, you make magic

GET PERSONAL

- With a garden, it's important to tell a story. Think about your goal: Are you interested in privacy? Do you like eating outdoors? If you travel, visit gardens, but don't come back from Italy wanting a Tuscan garden. The thing to take away is how the Italians use their outdoor space.
- A garden should resonate psychologically. Don't think it has to match the style of your house. If you have a historic home, you might want a more modern garden. The important thing is that the house and garden relate. The only thing I wouldn't do is a Japanese garden unless you have a traditional Japanese-style house.
- My own property in the Hamptons isn't that big. It affords a lot of experience in just two acres. I designed my house with triple-hung windows, like at Monticello, so I could bring my Meyer lemon trees inside. I've grown hundreds of lemons—lemon soufflé is my specialty.

GO GREEN

- I've done a number of organic potagers, from Connecticut to Chicago to Bel Air. In Bel Air, they get four crops of corn a year. The owner told me she feels like she is in the country.
- I try to talk people out of a lawn in California. But in other places, if you're careful, you don't have to water much. I advise clients to not have the perfect lawn, which requires chemicals. I read that Harvard Yard is going organic, and organic compost is used on the National Mall.

- I'm doing a green roof right now for a Renzo Piano project in Greece. If your roof is flat, you can easily retrofit a green roof, and it has tremendous cooling effects for the building.

FLORA

- I don't like gardens that have a lot of color. Maybe I'm too tied to nature. But if you think about it, nature does have a color palette. In May and June, wildflowers are pale pink and blue; in August, they're bright orange and yellow, hot pink and purple.
- I encourage the planting of cutting gardens. People think they are spoiling a garden if they cut plants to bring inside, but actually it's the best way to get to know them better. Even if you don't have a cutting garden, snip branches or small flowers and put them in a vase. You can even cut judiciously from a perennial border—just not too much.
- I love species flowers—those found in nature that haven't been hybridized—like Hellebores, which are hardy. Some of my favorites: Rosa 'primula,' which scents the air like incense; Yulan magnolia; Hoop Petticoat daffodil; Snow Goose flowering cherry trees.