

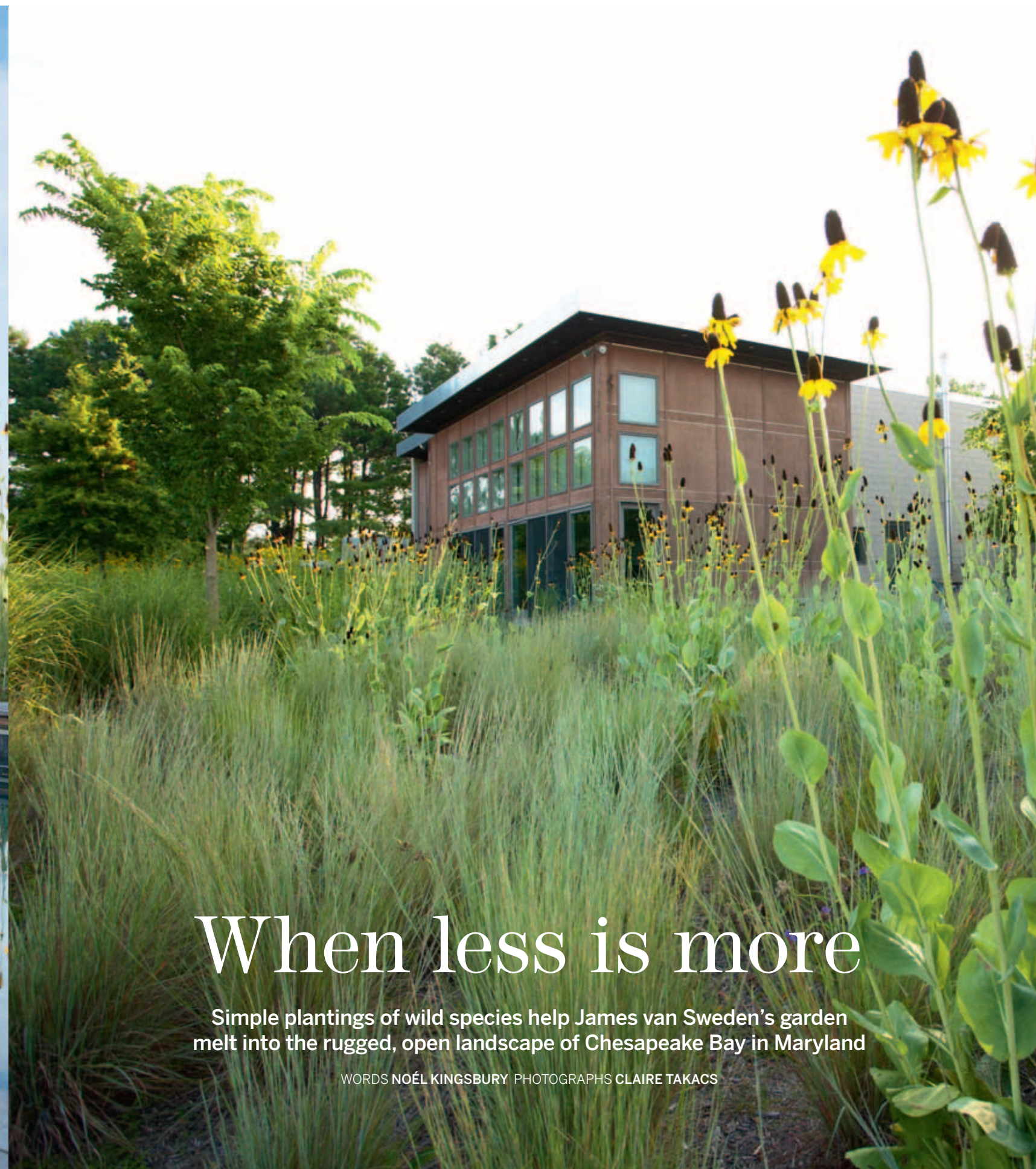
In brief

WHAT Private seaside garden
WHERE Chesapeake Bay,
Maryland, eastern USA
SOIL Loam
SIZE 1.25 acres
CONDITIONS Warm summers,
mild winters, windy, mostly
wet with occasional droughts.
SPECIAL FEATURES Use of
native plants; minimalist
design; boardwalks and
decking suitable for a person
using a wheelchair.



A bronze snake sculpture by Ray Kaskey cleverly doubles as a handrail to a minimalist, clutter-free swimming pool.

RIGHT The garden is full of native species such as large coneflowers (*Rudbeckia maxima*) and blue stem grass (*Schizachyrium scoparium*).



When less is more

Simple plantings of wild species help James van Sweden's garden melt into the rugged, open landscape of Chesapeake Bay in Maryland

WORDS NOÉL KINGSBURY PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS

designer garden



FAR LEFT Mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) fringes Pennsylvania bluestone paving in front of the house. The sphere is by sculptor Grace Knowlton.

CENTRE James van Sweden says *Inula helenium* but that doesn't look right.

LEFT The native grasses, alder saplings and coneflowers merge gently in to the surrounding grassy landscape, which is mown once a year.

James van Sweden's home on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay, in Maryland, was once just an expanse of abandoned farmland. "The place didn't sell for 11 years. Nobody else wanted it," says James. In a society that rates homeliness and nostalgia as highly as the United States does, this isn't surprising. It's a bit open, to say the least: the views comprise simply the placid expanse of Chesapeake Bay and the vast acres of land so flat it's almost the same level as the water, punctuated only by blocks of distant trees.

This setting – particularly on one of those classic winter days you get on the east coast of the USA, with strong, clear sunlight and a landscape bleached of colour – reminds me of an abstract painting. James has been a lifelong collector of contemporary art, so the minimalism of the landscape appealed to him; he saw the potential in the place, while the ancestral Dutchman in him responded to the flatness. "Hills get in the way of a good view," he

says. (I hope someone is collecting his slightly off-beam one-liners – James is good at them.)

James decided to create a garden of around one and a quarter acres around the house. He wanted his garden to melt into the landscape beyond – abandoned farmland that's a mix of fast-growing wildflowers and native grasses.

This choice is typical of James. After all, his big break in landscape design came in 1977, when he and his business partner Wolfgang Oehme replanted the grounds of the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington DC with perennials and grasses alongside more traditional woody plants. The planting led to a revolution in the planting design of open space in the eastern USA. "From the start, we had a lot of fun," says James, "and I learned a lot."

James and Wolfgang designed James' Chesapeake Bay garden using the simple division of labour that established their practice's reputation: James set out the broad outlines, which

Wolfgang then filled with planting. This includes two native grasses that have become important in the style of planting design on which the Oehme van Sweden partnership has established its reputation: blue stem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*). Both appear in James's garden, and the switch grass is a particularly important design element in its outer reaches, blurring the boundary between garden and wild landscape beyond (see also xxxxx, page 81).

Paths mown through the long grass lead to the waterside and a seating area in a shelter made from white-painted driftwood by sculptor Ben Forgey (pictured overleaf). To one side of the property a line of trees acts as a hedge bulked up with native species of Indian bean tree (*Catalpa bignonioides*), sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), buckeye (including *Aesculus flava*), hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) and swamp bay (*Magnolia virginiana*). On the inland side is a circular pond fringed with



PORTRAIT BY THOMAS ARLEDGE

Oehme, van Sweden and Associates

James van Sweden (born 1935) trained as an architect in his native Netherlands, but went on to study landscape; his main concern is spatial design. Wolfgang Oehme (born 1930) was a horticulturist in eastern Germany in the 1950s, where his main influence was Karl Foerster, the grandfather of contemporary planting design. Their partnership, formed in 1977, soon became one of the USA's most respected landscape practices. James is still active on a daily basis, but management of the firm has now passed on to three younger partners, Sheila Brady, Lisa Delpace and Eric Groft.

RIGHT Simple decking and boardwalks made of pressure-treated pine allow James to explore that garden in his wheelchair.

CENTRE Wild indigo (*Baptisia australis*) produces deep blue flowers in late spring and early summer, followed by these dark seed pods.

FAR RIGHT James has collected large pots over the years; the largest in this group is an old Greek oil jar. Growing beside them are a swamp bay (*Magnolia virginiana*) and the switch grass *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah'.





▷ Manchurian wild rice (*Zizania latifolia*), a lush waterside grass; given the nature of the landscape it looks entirely natural.

Planting around the house involves both perennials and shrubs, with an emphasis on the native. Many of the perennials grow in blocks, but the intention is to let nature take its course and allow species to in mingle and find their own location as they seed themselves around the garden. The size and enthusiastic growth of many of the plants here clearly thrills James. “The silphiums are 9ft tall, *Rudbeckia maxima* seven or eight,” he says enthusiastically. “It changes dramatically. Every week is different. It works well as an all-season garden – it’s especially good in winter – and I don’t cut it down until February.”

Since laying out the garden in 2000, the only major change has been the construction of a swimming pool on the seaward side of the house; this has been designed to allow James to use the pool as easily as possible: a neurological disorder has required

him to use a wheelchair since 2007. Being a flat site, with decking between the main house and guesthouse, it has been relatively easy to convert the garden to allow James access in his wheelchair.

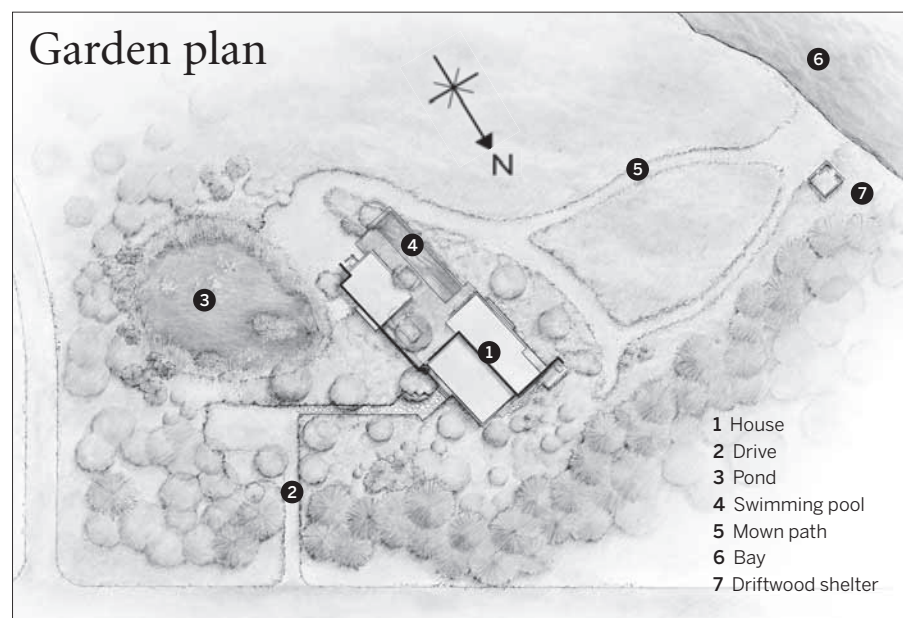
This is a peaceful spot, soothed by the calm water of the pond and pool by the house, and Chesapeake Bay beyond. The garden blends in beautifully with its landscape, by using so many of the elements that could naturally belong to it. It’s a masterclass in the principle that *less is more*. □

FURTHER READING

You can read more about the work of James van Sweden in two forthcoming books. *The Artful Garden: Creative Inspiration for Landscape Design*, by James van Sweden and Tom Christopher, is due to be published by Random House in January 2011. James also features in Noël Kingsbury’s *Garden Designers at Home*, published by Pavilion in October 2010.

TOP LEFT Mown paths through grasslands beyond the garden lead to a driftwood shelter by sculptor Ben Forgey, which overlooks the bay.

TOP RIGHT Wild oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) bear these bobbing, flattened flower heads from late summer to early autumn.



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Wild planting

Owner James van Sweden loves to fill his garden with plants that grow naturally in this part of America

1. Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*)
“According to most people, the hackberry has no value whatsoever, but I love it,” says James. “It has a sense of humour and grows in a higgledy-piggledy way.” It is a robust shade tree that develops a broad canopy when grown in the open. It can grow up to 30m tall and will tolerate a range of soils and growing conditions.

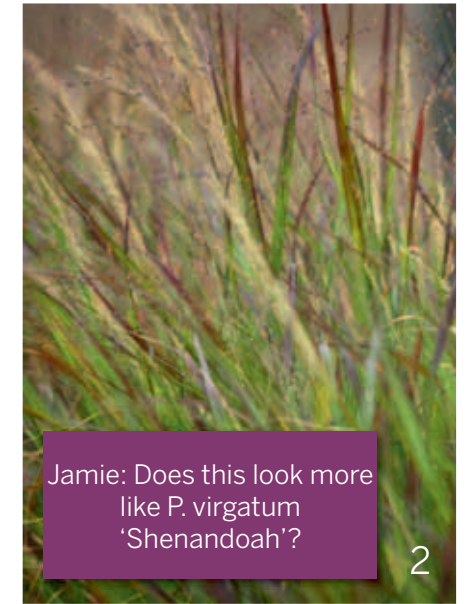
2. Switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*)
P. virgatum is an important prairie grass and has become one of the most planted ornamental species. Growing to around 2m, with a 1m spread, it makes a major impact from late summer to winter with a cloud-like head of tiny flowers, followed by seed. It prefers full sun and fertile soil.

3. Mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*)
“This plant looks so cool in the summer,” says James. This species has white or pale lavender flowers on 1m-high, tidy, bushy-looking plants that, James says, “Look almost like boxwood, they are so dense.” Bees love it, and the minty smell is distinctive. It prefers sun or light shade and average to damp soils.

4. Large coneflower (*Rudbeckia maxima*)
A dramatic coneflower with 1.2m flowering stems emerging from a rosette of greyish, paddle-shaped leaves. From moist pinewoods in Arkansas southwards, it flourishes in full sun in north European gardens, but seems to need digging up and dividing every few years to ensure continued flowering.

5. Blue stem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
This grass is common across the USA and southern Canada, and brings tones of silver-grey and red-pink to roadsides, prairie and wasteland. It has great potential as a garden plant and several good strains are available commercially. It grows up to 90cm tall in gardens and will thrive in any soil in full sun.

6. Cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*)
A tall and strong-growing perennial with bold yellow flowers, best planted in the wilder reaches of the garden. Be careful, though – it has shown some potential for invasive spread in Europe. It likes fertile soil and plenty of sun.



Jamie: Does this look more like *P. virgatum* ‘Shenandoah’?

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