

Man Of All Seasons

New York's High Line and Gardens of Remembrance, London's Serpentine Galleries Pavilion and gardens for the Venice Architecture Biennale, to name just a few. At 72, Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf is busier than ever.

Interview *Minou op den Velde*
Photography *Maurits Giesen*

What are you working on now?

I've just designed a 2,000m² roof garden for a new convention hotel in Amsterdam's Overhoeks district, as well as a garden for Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, the Netherlands, which was founded by art collector Joop van Caldenborgh. And in Lucerne, Switzerland, I'm developing a three-hectare private garden on a lake. No, I'm not thinking of retiring just yet. Whenever I find myself doing nothing for an hour or so, I just walk back to my studio. *[Laughs]* My life is my work.

Yet, you didn't discover the world of plants until you were 25...

Yes, you could say I blossomed late. I lived life more or less as it presented itself, working at my parents' bar and restaurant until I thought: "Is this what my entire life will be like?!" I then took on all kinds of jobs, working everywhere, from a fish auction to a steel plant. One day, I thought: "Perhaps working with greenery might suit me? That could be sweet, working outdoors." So, I took a job at a garden centre and fell in love with plants. Within six months, I had filled my mother's garden with a huge variety of beautiful things, and I started to attend gardening classes in the evenings. My brother and I are the only ones who decided to do something completely different than our

relatives. He became a gardener, but for years he never really understood what I was doing. He was more of a 'classical' gardener: building terraces, having a chat... I myself try to design landscapes that improve with time.

You're travelling a lot. What is the most beautiful garden you've ever seen?

I used to be fond of English manor gardens, and I could spend hours at Sissinghurst Castle or Hidcote Manor Gardens, talking to plant lovers and growers. Plants have always been an important part of English gardens, unlike classical French and Italian gardens, where the topiary is more important. But after a while, I began to feel the traditional English garden was more about decoration than design. Great Dixter [the house of British gardener and writer Christopher Lloyd (1921-2006)], for example, has a different theme each year, with alternating plants and annual ones. In such a garden, you're essentially arranging flowers. I found out that the world of wild gardens is far more attractive. The dynamics! In the event of a storm, the garden can be all over the place; when it rains, it might be covered in glistening raindrops. In the 1980s, I came into contact with the 'back to nature' movement: people who approached gardening very differently, who felt that a plant that is no longer in bloom can be just as beautiful as a blossoming one. >





According to all the guidebooks, plants that no longer blossom should be removed by October. I think that's nonsense. Why would a dead seedpod not be interesting? Why is it that something ugly can still be perceived as beautiful? These questions have fascinated me all my life.

You had been designing gardens for some time before you became internationally recognised in 1996, when you designed the Dream Park in Sweden. Your reputation grew even further after you designed a garden for the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010. What were you doing in the years leading up to this success?

The Architecture Biennale resulted in an invitation to do London's Serpentine Galleries Pavilion in 2011. That led to a commission to develop a garden in Bruton, UK, for art dealers Hauser & Wirth. These assignments were beyond expectation, considering my early years as a designer. Until I reached 50, my income was very low. But I became obsessed with plants. In 1982, my wife and I started a nursery in Hummelo [in the Dutch province of Gelderland], not because I wanted to do this commercially, but because I wanted to expand my knowledge of plants and the way I could use them in my work. At night, I often dreamt about the garden I wanted to create the next morning. Most people of my generation were not overly enthusiastic: "Yes, we know these plants are beautiful, Piet, but very little seems to flourish in your gardens." Now, some 40 years later, people think differently about the environment, greenery and their own surroundings. The elements of my work that they once found odd – the wildness, the plant combinations and grasses reminiscent of natural meadows – suddenly go down very well.

Your most famous design is the plant arrangement for the High Line in New York, a city park on an elevated railway line, which is almost two and a half kilometres long. You once said: "The High Line looks wild and natural, but was difficult to make." Can you explain?

The complexity is tricky. Each plant has its own typical environment. In a community of plants, no species should grow at the expense of others. When I am designing, I see an entire show in my mind's eye, as consecutive scenes: If I place certain plants in specific spots, I

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envisage what will happen during the autumn and in the following year. I visit the High Line several times a year. It is great to talk to the municipal gardeners there. Sometimes, a plant will have disappeared and I'll say, "That was inevitable, because the birch trees have grown. What shall we do?" And they will come up with a list of ideas. They enjoy it when I drop by, and they accompany me all day. These on-going discussions are what drive me, much more than creating 'perfect' gardens.

Your work takes you all over the world. Have you ever met extraordinary people on the plane?

Thomas Struth – the famous photographer – sat next to me on the plane when I was travelling to Chicago. He asked me what I did for a living, and I dared him to guess. He thought I might be some kind of artist... [Chuckles] He showed me his work, I showed him some of mine on the iPad. We really hit it off. We're still friends.

What do you always take with you?

I travel with a minimum amount of luggage, but I always bring my camera. I've taken countless pictures of the High Line in New York. Looking over the Hudson River at the end of the day is so fantastic. The evening light bathes the plants in a beautiful glow. Those are the moments I wouldn't miss for anything. ■

