

Down the rabbit hole

James Golden's New Jersey garden is like entering another world, where visitors are enveloped by huge perennials and grasses

WORDS NOËL KINGSBURY PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS

I must admit to having a deeply personal interest in this New Jersey garden. In 2001, its creator, James Golden, came across the book *Designing with Plants*, which I wrote with Piet Oudolf. James, a semi-retired marketing manager, says he was “powerfully moved by the book”, adding that “its photographic details of plant shape, texture, colour, structure, and the rampant, almost tactile, beauty of the Oudolf garden photos... the big plantings recalled an *Alice in Wonderland* world... and the appreciation for all stages of a plant's life – even death in winter – hit my bullseye.”

His awareness of an alternative to the sterile conventions of North American gardening had been previously aroused by the grassy naturalism of the work of James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme, which had by the early 2000s made quite an impact on the East Coast of America.

This is one of those immersive gardens, a secret world within a secret world. It is deep in the woods, where it forms a self-contained glade – a giant mass of grasses and large perennials surrounded by a wall of trees, mostly red maples and American beech. The lush perennial growth contrasts with the trees but forms the kind of environment you would expect to find here naturally.

There are just enough tell-tale signs of human presence to remind us that this is a garden: the occasional low-impact piece of sculpture, gravel paths, low walls (of the local rock argillite) and a few clipped evergreens. If they were not here, we could too easily be taken in that this really is all nature's doing.

James started the garden in 2006, having gardened in Brooklyn, where he is based for part of the week, and locally at Rosemont, New Jersey. “It's a prairie,” he says, emphasising that the garden is on heavy, wet clay saturated for much of the year. “I cut down trees to create a clearing and planted many native plants, all carefully selected for the difficult growing conditions. Many non-natives too, if they liked wet clay. Most are highly competitive, even aggressive, and I try to match them so they keep each other in control. Then I stand aside and intervene only when necessary.” Everything is big and there is clearly a lot of self-seeding going on but nothing seems to take over at anything else's expense. “I think of mess as a positive term,” says James. “My gardening process ▷

In brief

Name The Garden at Federal Twist.

What A lushly naturalistic garden deep in the woods.

Where Central New Jersey, USA.

Size One and a half acres.

Soil Heavy, wet clay.

Climate Cold winters, warm and humid summers.

Hardiness rating USDA 6b.





James's house, on a high point overlooking the garden, is framed by large American plane trees (*Platanus occidentalis*). The shrub dominating the view is *Salix udensis* 'Sekka', while the stately *Inula racemosa* 'Sonnenspeer', to the left, was a favourite of the late German landscape architect Wolfgang Oehme.

▷ is a series of interventions to control mess, refine line and legibility, and sculpt mass from mess.”

He may grow lots of natives but he is no nativist. “I can’t find the visual richness and expressiveness I want with native plants alone,” he says. Nevertheless, the big natives seem to set the pace, along with Asian-origin *Inula racemosa* ‘Sonnenspeer’ and *Miscanthus* grass cultivars, which are large and visually dominant. James keeps it all in check with an annual burn: “You have to be careful of the miscanthus though – it almost explodes.”

For somewhere that feels so hidden, it is a very public garden. That’s because James shares it with the world through his blog, *View from Federal Twist*, which is an apt description, for it is a view not only out on to the garden through some stunning photography, but also the thinking aloud of one of the most reflective of gardeners. He quotes poetry and essays, and explores philosophical concepts in a seemingly endless attempt at understanding what he has made, and does so in an engaging and lyrical voice that pulls you into his inner world. Making it so digitally public, seems to underscore what a truly 21st-century garden this really is. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address 208 Federal Twist Road, Stockton, NJ 08559, USA.

Website federaltwist.com

Open The Garden Conservancy (gardenconservancy.org) has an open day on 8 October, 10am–6pm. To arrange private visits, email federaltwistroad@gmail.com

Main image A path cutting across the heart of the garden is swamped by plants including yellow-flowered *Rudbeckia maxima* and the tall grass *Miscanthus x giganteus*.

Below, left to right

The perennials and grasses eventually conceal this area close to the house. The pool provides habitat for frogs, salamanders and other water-loving wildlife.

This part of the garden is intended to evoke a sense of mystery and the past. Historically, logs were a common form of seating in woodland environments.

The floor-to-ceiling windows of the house allow views of the garden all year. The flamboyant ostrich fern *Matteuccia struthiopteris* adds to the abundant foliage.

Writing a garden blog

The garden blogosphere is an incredibly global one. Gardeners can often learn a surprising amount from people in different climate zones. Writing a garden blog is a great way to join an international community of gardeners. It is not just a way of sharing information or thoughts but also a way of reflecting on why you do what you do; it helps you think critically about your garden.

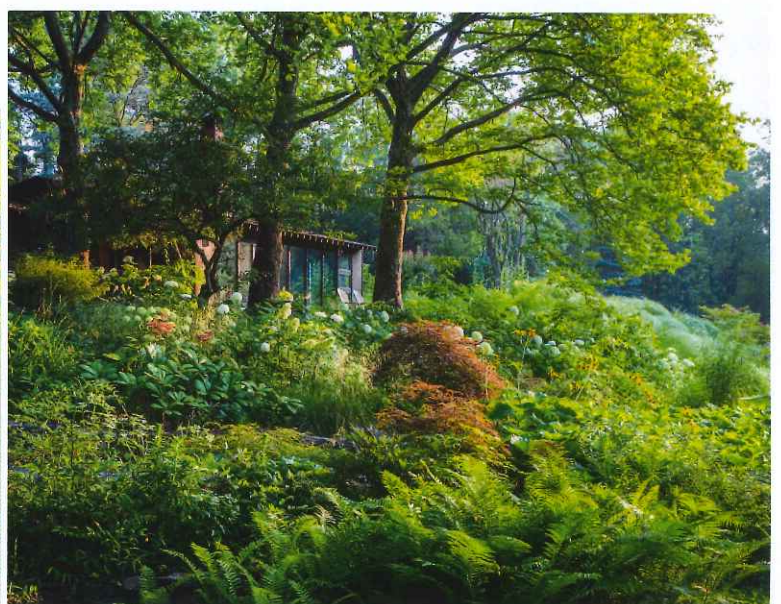
- **Take photographs.** Lots of them; at all times of year; at different times of day; and in different weather conditions.

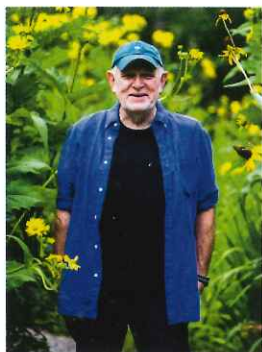
- **Use postings to think aloud about your decision-making.** What plants to get, paths to lay, whether or not to prune that shrub. This way you can share insights into the garden-making process.

- **List favourite plants (or ones you dislike).** Writing a whole posting about your experience of a plant is possibly going to be more than has been written about that plant than in any garden reference book.

- **Write about other gardens.** James often does this as it’s a valuable way to contribute to our knowledge of good gardens.







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of James's favourite plants from his garden

1 *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Album'

Tidy spires of white, midsummer flowers on very upright stems, which are good as seedheads too. Flowering lasts well in sun and fertile soil. 1.2m. AGM*. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9b†.

2 *Physostegia virginiana* 'Miss Manners'

Selected by American plantsman Darrell Probst for its well-behaved, non-invasive habit. Late-flowering and a particularly pure white. Best in sun or light shade in damp, fertile soil. It runs but can die out. 60cm. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

3 *Astilbe chinensis* Purple Candles (= 'Purpurkerze')

Too bright a pink? But this is the one astilbe that looks good in winter too, as it has interesting, firm, narrowly conical seedheads. Mid to late summer. Sun or light shade in moist, fertile soil. 1m. RHS H7, USDA 3.

4 *Onoclea sensibilis*

This very distinctive, sensitive fern slowly spreads through underground runners. The autumn colour can be good, and the spore-bearing heads are a winter feature. Moist, fertile soil. 50cm. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 4a-9b.

5 *Vernonia fasciculata*

This flowers much earlier than other ironweeds, and is also shorter. It's a good, sturdy, upright, structure plant. Sun and fertile, moist soil. 1.2m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.

6 *Eupatorium purpureum*

This mid- to late-summer flowering butterfly magnet seeds itself around here. It's tough and reliable and also has good winter structure. Best in sun with fertile, moist soil. 2m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-10b.

7 *Silphium perfoliatum*

Another plant that self seeds in the garden at Federal Twist. Silphiums are all big and bold and yellow. This one grows tall in full sun, on fertile soils. It can be aggressive though. 3m. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

8 *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* var. *alba*

With white, fluffy flowers in early autumn, this burnet combines elegant foliage with robust, upright growth. "It tends to seed about," says James. Sun in moist, fertile soils. 1.2m. RHS H5, USDA 3a-8b.

9 *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus'

The subtle variegation of this cultivar adds a light touch to the whole plant. Zebra grass has finger-like flowers in autumn and seedheads that last well into the winter. 2.2m. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

10 *Silphium laciniatum*

The gopher plant has yellow daisies on tall stems and unique, divided, leathery leaves that look best when backlit by the late afternoon sun. They are a feature until well into winter. 3m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9b.

11 *Pycnanthemum muticum*

One of the recently popular mountain mints, notable for the long-lived, silvery bracts and spearmint smell. Spreading in sun or light shade on moist, but well-drained soils. 1m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9b.

12 *Carex muskingumensis*

Very distinctive sedge with gold-edged, light-green, semi-evergreen foliage (in northwest Europe) forming tight clumps. Spreading in sun or light shade on moist soils. 1m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.



*HOLDS AN AWARD OF GARDEN MERIT FROM THE ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY. †HARDINESS RATINGS GIVEN WHERE AVAILABLE.

