Edwina von Gal spouts Vreelandesque aphorisms: No flower gardens around the foundation of a house, and don’t cut the grass so short!

BY LINDA LEE

PORTRAIT BY ALLAN POLLOK-MORRIS
er aunt was style icon Diana Vreeland, but Edwina von Gal grew up in rural Brewster, New York. “It was all dairy land,” von Gal says. “And we lived in an old farm house.” Those two influences—the fashion sense of Vreeland and the old landscape of farms and fields—come together in von Gal’s landscaping practice. Her clients include Calvin Klein, Larry Gagosian, Cindy Sherman, Richard Serra, a Frank Gehry museum in Panama, food goddess Ina Garten, and numerous celebrities and socialites with homes on the East End of Long Island.

The landscapes she creates for them, however, are so natural-looking, you would swear you were looking at what was there before the houses were built: say, a potato farm, pastures edged with oxeye daisies, dooryards that evolved over hundreds of years.

“My daughter says, ‘You get paid to make it look like you didn’t do anything there,’” says von Gal, who is in her mid-60s. But she indeed does a great deal, starting with ripping out invasive species: Oriental bittersweet, purple loosestrife, the multiflora roses that were once recommended as “living fences,” “wildlife cover” and a way “to stabilize sandy soil.” After that, if necessary, she moves mountains of dirt to reshape the pancake-flat land in the Hamptons, to add shadow and surprise. Then she plants the bayberries, oaks, red cedars, hornbeams, the spirea and viburnum, native grasses and bushes. She also makes ponds, cozy outdoor rooms, naturalized grasslands. Finally, she seeds a carpet of lawn, clover, beach grass or wildflowers.

Once, when she was busy on a large project, a neighbor walking a dog came by and expressed concern that she was stripping the land of its greenery, your basic friendly-but-alarmed “What’s going on here?” von Gal says. “I had never stopped to think that someone would think it was a negative. I was so focused on what it was going to be.” So she installed a sign: “Ecological restoration in progress.”

Although she has created landscapes in many places, she loves working in the Hamptons, where she lives in a Modernist house on stilts in a salt marsh thick with scarlet glasswort. The house, built in the 1970s on Accabonac Harbor, was designed by Hamilton Smith, an associate of Marcel Breuer. Modern houses of that period scorned shiplap siding or shingles as too fussy, and either went with the all-white concrete and stucco box that stood out on a landscape, or a low-lying house made of wood that weathered and became one with its surroundings.

She was not always a modernist. “When I first started out I was doing quite traditional,” she says. “The big craze was for the Gertrude Jekyll mixed border, arts-and-crafts-style gardens, massive amounts of perennials.” Von Gal now thinks of the perennial border as like having a 3-year-old who needs constant attention and direction. “People don’t have the gardening staff to do that,” she said.

When she was asked to create a landscape for Joe D’Urso’s renovation of a house by some Marcel Breuer associates (Herbert Beckhard and Jeff Vandeberg) in the late 1980s, she says, “It was like a smack upside the head—just to look at this order and symmetry, and balance and form. That was a big turning point for me.” Likewise, D’Urso had an influence. In the 1970s, he had been the leading proponent of the loft look—open plan, low furniture, polished floors, industrial lighting, visible duct work—a style that made its way to the Hamptons, and resulted in lots of pared-down beach houses. Von Gal’s name these days is often found in the company of other celebrated figures of modern life, like Bruce Mau, Laurie Anderson and Maya Lin, with whom she has collaborated on several projects, including Storm King Wavefield at Storm King Art Center and The Meeting Room at Queen Anne Square.

Von Gal went from fussy borders and high-maintenance gardens to simple, naturalistic
The landscape designer’s East Hampton home, 2014

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLAN POLLOK MORRIS
Calvin Klein is one of her many clients who have signed on for the full von Gal: gardens and landscapes that thrive without extra watering, chemicals, fertilizers, fungicides.

landscapes. Her gardens are not all Modernist, however. “The concept I work from is, when you’re in the house looking out, it should look like the view, and from the outside, it should look like the house,” she says. It’s a formula that seems so simple, and yet doesn’t even occur to many home owners. “A modern house is not going to get a gate with old twisty branches.” And, unless you live in an actual English cottage, she eschews foundation plantings. Von Gal points out that “Masterpiece Theater” manor houses never have flowers cluttering up their foundations.

Some of her landscapes look like a village green in Wales, Great Britain. She’s done wattle fences, gates and trellises; bee gardens; dogwood-edged lawns; a minimal pool surround worthy of Ken Smith; beach houses with what anyone would insist is no landscape whatsoever. “I like to think my work is unidentifiable—it’s supposed to look natural,” she says. “Clients laugh about how much it took to look that way. They have a pretty good idea about what we did.”

Klein is one of her many clients who have signed on for the full von Gal: gardens and landscapes that thrive without extra watering, chemicals, fertilizers or fungicides. “I don’t take a job now unless that’s understood,” she says.

Clients often make the mistake of growing their tomatoes pesticide-free, but bathing their surrounding lawns in chemicals. “I wouldn’t call it a mistake,” she says, “I think it’s an oversight. They grow organic vegetables, but they are walking across a toxic lawn. What’s the lawn guy spraying on the trees and shrubs? Most of it is unnecessary.” Instead, she says, “people should be growing grass longer—cutting it short makes for anorexic grass—and letting clover, even dandelions, grow freely. Water deeply, but not often.”

She urges people not to fire the “lawn guy,” but to educate. Surveys show that 90 percent of respondents use chemicals on their lawns, mostly fertilizer and herbicides for weeds. To counter that, in 2013, she created a movement, the Perfect Earth Project, that advocates for no (or few) chemicals. The organization’s website, perfectearthproject.org, provides free instructions, as well as information about news and events.
Calvin Klein’s Miami home, reflective of von Gal’s signature ‘undone’ style

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLAN POLLOK MORRIS