

Rick Darke

John Hoyland talks to the writer who has spent a lifetime urging us to think of our landscape, gardens and everyday lives as one. Portrait Charlie Hopkinson

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The Bluebell Line, the Sussex steam railway, is running today and that makes Rick Darke a happy man. The American designer, writer and photographer is most excited to be back in Britain not for the chance to revisit old friends and great gardens but to see the developments at one of his favourite railways. "I've always loved trains and railroads. I admire the beauty of the engineering, but also the railroad is the single most important thing that has defined the landscape of America."

This fascination with the interaction of culture and landscape has been at the centre of Darke's

While he was at Longwood Darke took up photography as an aid to studying and recording not only plants but also landscapes. He is continually taking photographs, even while talking. And he talks a lot: a continual fizz of ideas and information, places you must see, books you have to read. "I'm just this side of obsessive about taking pictures," he says. Just this side? "OK, maybe I *am* a bit obsessive, but I need to document and record everything to understand it and to communicate

community in 200 hectares (500 acres) of pristine prairie and forest.

To the ears of a European gardener this may sound remote, even irrelevant. Darke is adamant, though, that there is no distinction between gardens, the landscape and the culture that they sit in: "My garden doesn't stop at the edge of my property. What happens inside it affects the landscape and the landscape affects my garden. I feel the loss of an oak in a local wood as keenly as the loss of anything in my garden. What works in a garden can be scaled up into the landscape and what works in the landscape can be scaled down into a garden."

Darke's latest book, *The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes*, is a fundamental exposition of his ideas. The book is a scholarly encyclopaedia of ornamental grasses, the most comprehensive and well-researched book on the subject, and one that will remain the most important reference on ornamental grasses for decades. For most writers this would be enough; not for Darke. The rest of the work describes the singular importance of grasses, over and above all other plants, not only in garden and landscape design but also in people's lives.

"Grasses are the most beautiful plants. The quality of line, in profusion, creates textural effects and forms that no other plant can. They are an indispensable element of livable landscapes. And that is what my work is about. Enabling livable landscapes." □

• *The American Woodland Garden* (Timber Press, 2002); *The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes* (Timber Press, 2007).

NEXT MONTH:
Christopher Woodward.

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studies for the past 30 years, resulting in two influential books: one on the American woodland and one on grasses in the landscape.

Darke's introduction to landscape and gardening study was accidental. A 1960s college drop-out, he flirted with engineering, then, at his mother's suggestion, took a summer course on plants. "It was basic botany and I loved it. The study of plants allowed an organised approach to landscape and I was so turned on by it that I enrolled on a college botany course and then did post-graduate botanical study."

His studies led to a job at Longwood Gardens, near Philadelphia, which lasted 20 years. At the time, Longwood was one of America's most important botanic gardens, with 11,000 plants covering more than 400 hectares (1,000 acres). Darke started work there as an assistant taxonomist and helped to extend the collection. He ended his time there as curator of plants, with responsibility for all the plant collections.

it to other people. First and foremost I am a teacher and the easiest way to teach is to show someone a picture."

His photographic record of local woodlands, taken over a two-year period, led to his book *The American Woodland Garden*. "Direct observation of regional systems, both cultural and biological, has to be the basis for good landscape and garden design. The only way to create good gardens, good landscapes – spaces people feel comfortable in – is to begin by observing and studying the existing landscape," he explains.

Since he left Longwood 11 years ago Darke has been doing just that – studying landscapes in order to improve them. As he puts it: "I try to find ways, through direct observation, to blend the biology that creates a landscape with the culture that is also part of that landscape." It is the work of what he calls a landscape ethicist. In one of his latest projects he is advising property developers in Texas on how to create an environmentally friendly

