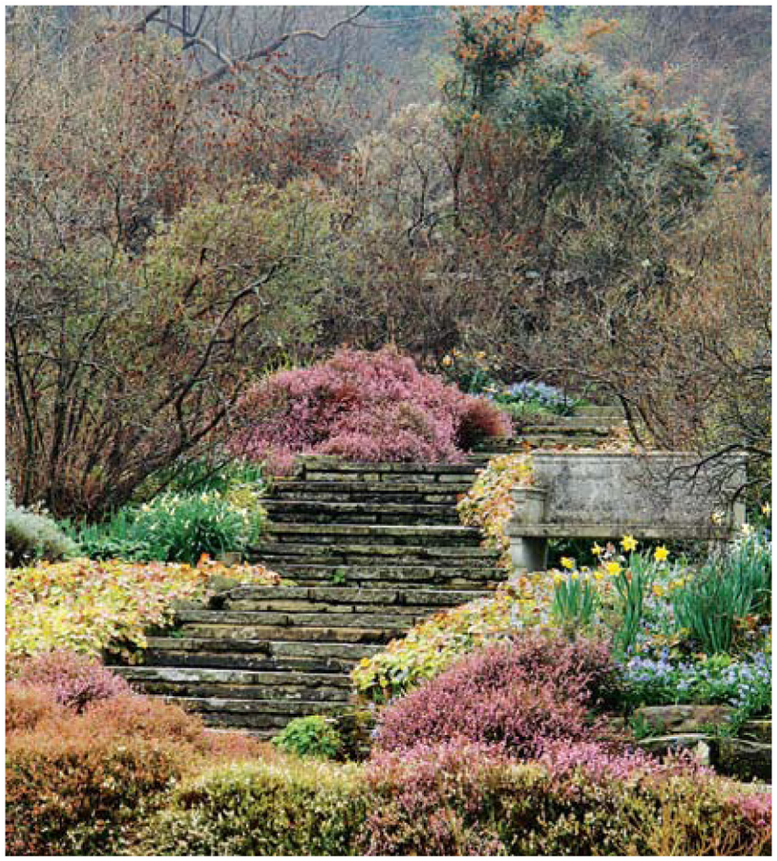
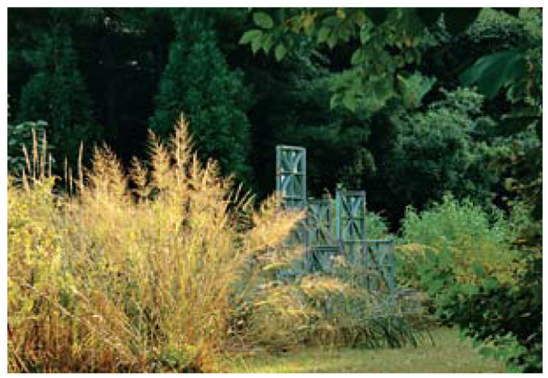
groundbreaker

RICK DARKE

Showing us how to understand the natural world ... and how to grow gardens today

STORY BY BILL MARKEN ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK DARKE





Top right: With his words and photographs, Rick Darke (shown here in front of an American beech) inspires a clearer understanding of the natural world. **Above left:** A landscaped slope in an English garden originally designed by William Robinson reflects the carefree spirit of "wild gardening" — pink heaths (*Erica*) blooming along with yellow *Narcissus* and blue *Scilla*. **Above right:** Beautiful and sustainable grasses are one of Darke's specialties. Part of a 20-year-old small meadow in his Pennsylvania garden features a graceful self-sown seedling of *Panicum virgatum* 'Dalla Blues'.

Rick Darke is an author, photographer and landscape-design consultant, but perhaps more than anything else he is an observer. For nearly four decades he has observed plants, wild places, landscapes around the world, his own garden and just about any place where things grow. Through his books and lectures, he shares what he has seen and learned — helping the rest of us view the green world around us with far more understanding, appreciation and involvement.

In his new book, *The Wild Garden: Expanded Edition* (Timber Press), Darke teams up across the ages — time-machine style — with a kindred spirit: William Robinson, the revolutionary 19th-century Irish (he immigrated to England as a young man) author/naturalist/gardener whose first edition of the book appeared in 1870. Both men were ahead of their times. Darke began writing about native plants early in his career and, 10 years ago, titled a book *In Harmony With Nature: Lessons From the Arts & Crafts Garden*. Robinson advocated the use of hardy native and exotic plants appropriate for local conditions, fighting against the trend of the day for flashy one-season-only tropicals: "Even on its votaries it is beginning to pall," as Robinson politely and understatedly decried the trend. The new edition of the classic book includes the complete text and original illustrations (engraved from line drawings and paintings by British artist Alfred Parsons) from the 1895 edition. Chapters cover topics such as "Plants Chiefly Fitted for the Wild Garden" and "Woodland Drives and Grass Walks." In addition, Darke has written new chapters explaining the significance of Robinson's thinking and added 125 evocative and illustrative color photographs of his own that bring to life Robinson's favorite plants and design concepts. The page size has been enlarged and given a square shape to better reveal the landscapes.

Why did Darke update the book? Its relevance for today had been on his mind since he encountered the full force of Robinson while writing his book on the Arts and Crafts movement more than a decade ago. He says that Robinson was a "phenomenal mind." Considered the father of the English Flower Garden, Robinson was a friend of Charles Darwin and a world traveler who rode the train across North America in 1870, absorbing wild landscapes from the New Jersey Pine Barrens to Yosemite. He recognized that resources were changing even then, and started writing about plants in ecological settings and what Darke calls the "ethics of wildness."

Much like Robinson, Darke has been moving deeper into the natural world and sustainable design as his career progresses. He grew up in New Jersey and credits his youthful respect for nature to the nearby woods of Grover Cleveland Park, where he played and walked nearly every day. The park also exposed him to sensitive naturalistic design — the work of the Olmsted Brothers, no less! He likes to recall the mountain silverbell trees (*Halesia tetraptera*) that grew there as "survivors," well-adapted role models for sustainability. Trained in science, he spent 20 years at Longwood Gardens — responsible for the extensive plant collections — and gained high-level mastery of horticulture. In the 1980s, he bought a home in the southeastern Pennsylvania countryside (about an hour from Philadelphia), where he could put into action his appreciation and understanding of the natural world.

Robinson had Gravetye Manor, a 16th-century West Sussex estate of some 1,000 acres on which he experimented with the idea of a wild garden and with his ethics of wildness. Darke has his one-and-a-half-acre garden in Pennsylvania where he observes, photographs, writes and lives out his values along with his wife and co-horticulturist Melinda Zoehrer. Their garden is a model of the natural process — constantly changing and evolving. He says, "The fun is in watching and intervening only when necessary." There's a lawn and, rather than built structures, an "organic architecture" of plants used as clerestory, layers, understory and other design functions. Darke estimates that 75 percent of the plants are Eastern regional natives, with a third to a half immediately local (from the county or township); the rest are plants from all over the world, and can harmonize with the garden and adapt to the site without becoming invasive. He doesn't use chemicals and hardly ever buys plants, giving the edge to seedlings brought in by wind, water and birds from nearby White Clay Creek Preserve: beech, ironwood, pawpaw, dogwood, witch hazel, sassafras and more. Darke assists the local plants' natural adaptation. He and Zoehrer weed mostly by hand, and before they pull out seedlings, they ask, "What is it — should it stay?" Black oak is one of their success stories. Squirrels bring in the acorns, and Darke and Zoehrer keep an eye on the seedlings and how well they develop fall color. They keep the best and pull out the rest, and now have about a dozen oaks — some as high as 8 to 10 feet tall — that are exceptionally well adapted to the area. The goal with perennials, including ground covers, is similarly adaption based: plants that renew by self-sowing, need no extra watering and provide food for birds. Standouts are *Aster divaricatus* and goldenrod, which fill in naturally, and violets, which come up in a sweep of blue and white through fallen leaves.

Darke's books also show the evolution of his thinking toward the natural and the sustainable. After his first book, *For Your Garden: Ornamental Grasses* (1994), he was on his way to becoming an expert

Above: In *The American Woodland Garden*, for the chapter "Learning from a Mountain Stream," Darke spent nearly two decades photographing Red Clay Creek in southeastern Pennsylvania — in all seasons, and in a broad range of light conditions. Here he has captured the fleeting beauty of spring (including dogwoods) and the stark clarity of winter.

on the subject and an outspoken advocate for grasses as sustainable, problem-solving landscape plants. More recently, *The Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes* (Timber Press, 2007) is a comprehensive, big format, 484-page opus with more than 1,000 photos by the author. It's an inspiring love song to the world's grasses: "uncommonly graceful," "sensual," "translucency" and "extraordinary diversity, durability and versatility." He also addresses major misunderstandings about grasses, particularly the perceived invasive nature of some of them, especially *Miscanthus*, which can be a weed in one locality and the best solution in another. The book also reflects his bent toward landscapes that are "livable" — dedicated to balancing resources and consumption, sustainable in cultural and ecological terms.

The American Woodland Garden (Timber Press, 2002) grew out of Darke's two decades of observing and photographing the forest near his Pennsylvania home — at all seasons, with changing light and colors, up close and at long distance. Among the many lessons: You learn about designing gardens by direct observation of nature. You "learn from a woodland stream," as one chapter puts it, or you learn by watching how the natural world frames views.

In his books and lectures, Darke has carved out a singular niche and given us a new vocabulary for what he does and how he sees the world. He calls himself a "landscape ethicist": Ethics for a landscape should frame the aesthetic and practical goals of a design. Mostly he is talking about the need for a landscape to be both dynamic and sustainable — to recognize that change is natural but also to protect and conserve what is valuable. A design should blend the biology of the site with our human demands on it. He recognizes the inherent conflicts in that, and he judges an ideal landscape through a prism of dualities: reliable but serendipitous, personal but shared, sensual but practical, local but global. For better or worse, today we rarely have natural landscapes — more like "legacy landscapes," which reflect the impact of people, with a mix of native and introduced plants in a balance that might or might not be sustainable.

Darke's opinions on native plants have evolved too. He has renewed our appreciation for natives, especially those of our deciduous forests, but at the same time helped us recognize their limits. If he were starting over, he says he'd never use the term "native plants": "[It's] too generic, too commoditized, just like the word 'organic.'" Instead he advocates a practical, results-based process for choosing the right plants for a given situation. He can't support planting natives or other plants that will need a "crutch" to survive — think of all those California gardens full of plants that need an inordinate amount of water. Looking into a more sustainable future, perhaps the role model is the silverbell tree remembered from Darke's childhood. He has 20 or so silverbells in his garden now — hardy, undemanding survivors that are easily dug and transplanted, to relocate elsewhere in the garden or to share with friends.

See gallery of other Darke images at GARDENDESIGN.COM/DARKE