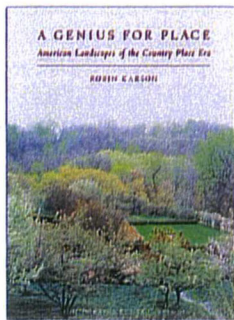


# The American GARDENER®

## A Genius for Place

Robin Karson, with photographs by Carol Betsch. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2007. 428 pages. Publisher's price, hardcover: \$65.

YET AGAIN Robin Karson has hit the ball out of the park. This is, after all, the American landscape historian who has received much critical acclaim for her previous books. Her latest opus is an edge-of-the-seat discourse on seven sublime American gardens, their extraordinary owners, and their exceptional designers.



*A Genius for Place* covers a period that begins in the late 19th century and ends as World War II threatens—a time of unprecedented expansion of wealth and seismic sociological changes. This coffee-table sized book explores a wide

range of design challenges and solutions, along with mesmerizing portraits of the patrons who paid handsomely for, and worked so closely with, the artists. As a result, Karson restores the luster of a romantic landscape style which, by the latter part of the 20th century, had fallen into disrepute as sleeker designs triumphed and the idea of “Nature as Guide” faded.

The book opens with an overview of the approach of such 19th-century giants as Frederick Law Olmsted and its influence on landscape gardeners of the day (the term landscape archi-

tect had yet to come into being). This is followed by three sections detailing the creation of seven estate gardens, spanning from Massachusetts to California. The chapters within each section provide fascinating details about both the garden owners and the designers.

The gardens include Gwinn and Stan Hywet Hall in Ohio, Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., Delaware's Winterthur, the Edsel Ford Grosse Pointe Shores estate in Michigan, Val Verde in California, and Naumkeag in Massachusetts. Their eight designers include five men—Warren H. Manning, Charles A. Platt, Jens Jensen, Lockwood de Forest Jr., and Fletcher Steele—and three women—Ellen Shipman, Beatrix Farrand, and Marian Cruger Coffin. The rising influence of women as landscape professionals is a fascinating subtext indeed.

The book is generously illustrated with historic photographs. These are complemented by the superb modern black and white pictures of Carol Betsch, which exquisitely capture the spirit of each site.

Too often, Americans prefer to focus on gardens on the other side of the pond, from England to Japan. In this book, as in her previous works, Karson redirects us towards our own homegrown antecedents. And we are that much richer for it.

—Linda Yang

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*A former garden columnist for The New York Times, Linda Yang is the author of four books, including The City Gardener's Handbook (Storey Publishing, 2002).*