

NEW BOOKS: *There's (at least) one to inspire every springtime gardener*

By **CHERYL B. WILSON**
Gazette Contributing Writer

GARDEN books come in many forms and sizes. Some are mundane how-to-do-it explanations. Others are full of color pictures to inspire gardeners to be bold with their plant combinations. Still others have an historical bent. Each year hundreds of new books are published and surely every gardener can find at least one to peruse for ideas.

Robin Karson of Amherst directs the Library of American Landscape History, also in Amherst, which seeks to preserve the record of our landscape architects and their work through books and exhibitions. Her latest book is "A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era" (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). Karson has worked on this enormous volume for nearly 15 years and her dedication to the project is admirable. She carefully researched the work of eight prominent landscape architects who practiced primarily from 1890 to 1940 and designed some of the landscapes of our most famous homes. They range from Naumkeag in nearby Stockbridge to Stan Hywet Hall in Ohio to Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., to Val Verde in Santa Barbara, Calif.

At first it was startling to realize that the hefty book — it measures 12 inches by 10 inches by 1.5 inches thick and weighs about 5 pounds — is devoid of color photographs. We are so used to gorgeous garden photography, especially in books of this size, that black and white seemed disap-

pointing. But, as I delved into the book, the rationale became obvious. "A Genius for Place" is about landscape architecture not about flower gardens.

Landscape architects are much more con-

stant. They give much more a sense of space and the poetic side of that."

Karson's book features seven country estates, each with its own chapter. The owners hired the best architects and landscape architects to design their retreats

mist, with whom many of them trained. Back then, landscape architecture was a new discipline with the first academic programs in America only founded in 1900.

Carol Betsch, managing editor of the University of Massachusetts Press, took the modern photographs of the country estates, in many cases matching the photograph to one from archives of a century ago. The

Oaks are open to the public while others are open only on a limited basis.

So many choices

Choosing just seven gardens from a list she had compiled of 100 possibilities was difficult, Karson said.

"The process was refined as I worked on it more and more," she explained. "I have lived and breathed Naumkeag," writing a book about its landscape architect, Fletcher Steele, in 1989. She also wrote a book about Gwinn, an estate on Lake Erie whose landscape was jointly designed by Manning and Platt. "There were so many intersections between the designers, their clients and the locales," she noted.

Finding all the archival photos and drawings "was an enormous group effort," Karson said. "It was a lot of detective work." Betsch was helpful as was the staff of the Library of American

Landscape History like Jane Roy Brown and scholars whose work was the foundation of Karson's research. Some of the estates have their own archives but Val Verde lacks such a resource. "I was lucky



Cheryl B. Wilson's picks for gardeners: From left, "A Genius For Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era" by Robin Karson with photographs by Carol Betsch, "Exotic Planting for Adventurous Gardeners" by Christopher Lloyd & friends and "American Chestnut: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of a Perfect Tree" by Susan Freinkel.

corned with pattern, with statuary, pathways, walls and the sculptural effects of trees and shrubs than with gardens with specific color palettes. Even a stand of blue delphiniums in a color photograph would detract from the overall effect of their spires in the landscape.

"I think some black and white garden photos are much more evocative than color because they allow space for your imagination," Karson explained in an interview. "They are more timeless and fo-

and, in many cases, retained their professional services over decades, adding onto the houses and enhancing the landscapes.

In addition there are chapters about each of the eight landscape architects included in the volume: Warren Manning, Charles Platt, Ellen Shipman, Marian Coffin, Beatrix Farrand, Jens Jenson, Lockwood de Forest Jr. and Fletcher Steele. They were all the second generation in the American field of landscape architect founded by the venerable Frederick Law Ol-

iver can see how the landscape has matured and changed over a hundred years. "The gardens had to be extant," so modern photos could be taken, she added. Some, like Winterthur and Dumbarton



Local author Robin Karson, left, and photographer Carol Betsch have collaborated on a new book, "A Genius For Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era" published by the University of Massachusetts Press.

in knowing Lockwood de Forest's son, Kellern, who shared photos," Karson said.

Some historians have dismissed the country estate period as basically eclectic, but "I'm finding it's in fact much more complex," Karson said. "All of the architects in the book were grounded in the Olmstedian stance. This gives their landscapes a sense of the great works of art, a commonality like painters going to the same places and studying with the same masters," she said. In her book she shows what concepts they shared and how they were different in their applications.

Although some designed very formal landscapes, they all were responsive to nature and the local environment. Gwinn, for instance, has an extensive wild flower garden designed by Manning, which he planted with thousands of species native to the East Coast and the Midwest. Val Verde, designed by de Forest, makes extensive use of desert and Mediterranean plants appropriate for a southern California landscape.

"A Genius for Place" is the eighteenth book undertaken by the Library for American Landscape History, which Karson founded in 1992. The private foundation provides insight into historic landscapes, inspiration to preserve them and guidance to owners on how to achieve accurate preservation.

"It's a multidisciplinary field," Karson said. "There is no such thing really as landscape history. It combines horticulture and landscape architecture, architecture and decorative arts as well as social and economic history." More information on her foundation can be found at www.lafh.org.