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

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GARDEN books come in all forms and sizes. Some are mundane how-to-do-it explanations. Others are full of colorful pictures to inspire gardeners to be bold with their plant combinations. Still others are 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 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 used to gorgeous garden photography, especially in books of this size, that black and white seemed disappointingly flat. 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 concerned with the maintenance. 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 authors hired the best architects and landscapers to design their retreats, 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 photographs to ones from archives of a century ago. The result is a book that makes the landscapes feel timeless and timeless.

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.

Karson's book was jointly designed by Manning and Platt. "There were so many intersections between the designers, their clients and the localities," 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 in knowing Lockwood de Forest's son, Kelham, 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 gave their landscapes a sense of the great works of art, a communal like-landscape going to the same place 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 eighth book undertaken by the Library for American Landscape History, which Karson founded in 1990. The private foundation provides grants 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, horticulture and decorative art as well as social and economic history. More information on her foundation can be found at www.lalh.org.

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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.