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In Montauk, a Garden Runs Delightfully Amok

At their weekend home on the outer edge of Long Island, the designers behind the firm Roman and Williams let nature lead.

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THE GRASS THAT blankets the only sizable expanse of lawn in Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch's two-acre Montauk garden is about a hand's width high and grows in lush whorls, like the coat of an English cocker spaniel. Standefer and Alesch — who in 2002 founded the New York-based design studio Roman and Williams (perhaps best known for the now much-imitated look it created for Ace Hotel, all antique wingback chairs and industrial brass light fixtures, midcentury end tables and oak-paneled walls) — bought this property over a decade ago and have since encouraged the grass to run luxuriantly amok. It is neither mowed nor neglected but rather nurtured each fall with an intensive regimen of organic fertilizer. "I want it long," Standefer says.

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You can infer from this process much about the couple's gardening philosophy. Champions of meadowlike borders and picturesque weeds, they hew closely to the 20th-century English poet, novelist and garden designer Vita Sackville-West's ideal of "sweet disorder" that is nevertheless "judiciously arranged," as she wrote in 1958. The couple's knee-high field of white cosmos is trimmed to a clean edge where it meets the swaying grass; empty oyster shells, cast off from summer barbecues, litter a pristine crushed-seashell pebble path. Both in their professional practice and in their own homes, they prioritize the textured and timeworn above the refined or precious. As we walk across the lawn, which bounces pleasantly underfoot, Alesch bends down to pet it.

This apparently effortless mix of chaos and discipline sets them apart from many of their fellow Long Island residents, who have traditionally been less enamored of wayward grasses, valuing order over romance. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's fictional West Egg, Nick Carraway's "ragged lawn" so perturbs Jay Gatsby that he sends his own gardener to tame it. The writer Michael Pollan, who grew up in Woodbury, N.Y., has described such obsessively manicured lawns as "nature under totalitarian rule." But Standefer and Alesch, 55 and 53, respectively, have taken a liberal approach to governing what the latter calls a "small country" of stately trees, unruly shrubs and clambering blackberry bushes that they acquired in 2016 as part of the purchase of a one-and-a-half-acre parcel of land adjacent to their main home, a white clapboard two-bedroom built in the 1950s. In contrast to the clean-cut boxwoods of the neighboring Hamptons, the couple's sprawling landscape, just 300 yards from the Atlantic coast, feels like a welcome return to wilderness — or at least an artful re-creation of it. Standefer, who was raised in Manhattan, spent summers in Montauk as a child (her parents had a house here), and Alesch, who grew up in what he calls "the hippie hills" of Malibou Lake in California, is a surfer: The enclave appeals to them because it invites a more carefree lifestyle than its buttoned-up neighbors. It's a place to grow your hair long and fill your garden with sunflowers.

STANDEFER AND ALESCH met in Los Angeles in the mid-90s, when they collaborated on Hollywood films. For the 1998 movie "Practical Magic," they designed and built a ramshackle house that blended American Queen Anne and Shingle styles and was overgrown with climbing roses — a home for a pair of witches, played by Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock, with décor that was historically minded, magpie-like and a little neo-Gothic, defined by materials like ebonized wood and hand-painted wallpaper. This aesthetic partnership continued with the couple's downtown Manhattan apartment and the Montauk place, which is set back from the road in a plot swept by ocean winds. As designers who are fascinated with how materials decay and evolve over time, they have welcomed the coastal air as a kind of natural collaborator in an outdoor-living experiment, for which they have moved beautiful but otherwise ill-equipped household objects (a mahogany chair from sub-Saharan Africa, shearling throws, kilim cushions) out into the newly expanded garden. Inevitably, the salty breeze transforms even their hardiest wooden furniture into wizened sculptures: Alesch has had to repeatedly resuscitate a pair of low elm benches that have buckled at the joints, and an antique rowboat is eroding behind the warped wooden picnic table at the front of the property. "Montauk eats things alive," Alesch says.

On Standefer's worktable sits a 1950s Russian kiln bought on eBay, as well as a vase with fennel blossoms from the kitchen garden, tools and glazing experiments. Juliana Sohn

Guests enter the property through a discreet, weathered wooden gate, which opens into "the main poetic artery," as Standefer describes it: a 50-foot-long outdoor tunnel dense with wisteria and climbing roses, woven through with glowing fairy lights. The effect is of leaving one world — the Montauk of hotel pools clogged with vacationing New Yorkers — and entering an archetypal secret garden. Throughout, Standefer subscribes to what she calls an "unkempt, almost Gertrude Jekyll-ish approach," referencing the doyenne of British Arts and Crafts landscape design; her goal is to encourage nature to acquiesce into a series of seemingly organic vignettes that have, in fact, been skillfully engineered. Both stories of the gabled, 1,500-square-foot house, for instance, are framed at the end of the curving bower like a portrait in a cameo necklace.

On one August afternoon, the structure's clapboard walls seem to be floating amid the dense cloud of flora that presses up against them: Delphinium, baptisia, fragrant mint and sprays of Queen Anne's lace are alive with heavy pollen-dusted bees. From an overflowing kitchen garden abutting the eastern wall (where the duo grows giant cabbages, heirloom carrots and rhubarb for cooking, elderberries for gin and angelica and echinacea for tinctures), a wide grass path wends past a wall of hydrangeas to the towering chestnut tree at the lawn's center. The couple's former neighbor, who had owned this land since the 1950s, planted most of the trees: In addition to the chestnut, there's a mulberry, a catalpa, two willows and a

sweet gum, all of which Standefer and Alesch enjoy in their full maturity. But the previous landowner also used the rear of his property as a graveyard for rusting machinery. When the couple took over the plot, they “started to heal the land,” Standefer says, reviving a natural wetland in the garden’s northwest corner by dredging out a corroded Buick and several decades’ worth of empty beer bottles.

The couple’s house, built in the 1950s, has a cedar roof and white shingles set off by a bower of wisteria, Tardiva hydrangea and pale purple Agastache. Juliana Sohn

During this recovery process, the landscape designer Marty McGowan — a friend with whom they had collaborated on the grounds earlier this decade at the Nantucket hotel Greydon House — convinced them to let him dowse for water in the garden. To Standefer’s surprise, Alesch discovered a naturally occurring ephemeral pond beneath a mound of debris. The small pool now glistens amid a soft ring of tiny white boneset flowers, like the weedy brook banked with milky field roses in the English painter Sir John Everett Millais’s “Ophelia” (1851-52). Beyond it, the outer reaches of the garden have an edge-of-the-world feel befitting Montauk, itself at the tip of Long Island. In the farthest corner, Standefer and Alesch reveal

a surprise tucked behind an overgrown hedge: a supernaturally large rose mallow flower in full bloom, its bowl of petals as taut and vibrantly red as a junk ship's sails. It is the only plant in the garden that isn't green, white or pale purple — a scheme inspired by the palette of Montauk's flora. "We love the idea of guests discovering this one deep red flower in the highlands," Standefer says.

Most weekends, the duo drives out to Long Island from Manhattan late on Friday and spends two full days laboring among their flowers and vegetables. Because they would like to safeguard gardening as a source of respite, their firm avoids landscaping projects, but the Montauk garden has informed their work in less obvious ways: When they bought the adjoining plot, they planned to refurbish and sell the 900-square-foot guesthouse that came with it. "Then, as we were cleaning it, we put a kiln in," Alesch adds. "I thought maybe we'd just use it temporarily." That was three years ago. Now, the single-story building contains a pottery studio for Standefer and a wood shop for Alesch, along with a pair of extra rooms at the back so that guests no longer have to sleep in tents in the garden.

Wild grasses and boneset grow beneath a black willow. Juliana Sohn

Standefer is teaching herself to make ceramics, often engraving the clay with leaf motifs inspired by her vistas. From the large cedar-plank table in the room's center, she picks up a chunky earthenware dish with a stout foot and a soft oatmeal glaze and lovingly points out its imperfections. "When you do something creative for a living, people start to commandeer that, so there's very little private space," she says, noting that their output here isn't always good — a relief from the hyper-criticism required of her profession. Ironically, it was cultivating this practice of un-self-conscious experimentation that motivated Standefer and Alesch to launch one of their most ambitious professional ventures yet: Roman and Williams Guild, a design boutique and cafe that the couple opened in New York's SoHo in 2017, where they showcase the work of like-minded artisans alongside their own collection of furnishings and lighting. (In Alesch's wood shop, for example, there are maquettes for spindle-like candlesticks that will later be fabricated from brass and silver.)

Before Guild opened, Roman and Williams was selected to collaborate with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to reimagine its British galleries, which will reopen in February 2020. Established in the 1980s, the 10 rooms — which between them house nearly 600 examples of art from the early 16th through the 19th centuries (a Renaissance terra-cotta bust, a Gothic Revival carved-oak chair made for the House of Lords) — were in need of reanimating. During research trips to England, the couple visited rolling gardens in Worcestershire and Cambridgeshire created by the venerated 18th-century landscape architect Capability Brown. They also went to the Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum, the oldest in Britain, dating to the early 17th century. Each place inspired their vision for both the galleries and their own land; the Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum, in particular — with over 5,000 types of plants arranged in Victorian glasshouses and a walled garden — was a revelation. It prompted Standefer and Alesch to abandon their plans to plant a rye field in the southeast quarter of their property (Alesch bakes his own bread) and instead design a classical garden arranged with perennials: wispy asparagus fern punctuated with cream-colored peonies, a shaggy lowland of artemisia where the ground is drier. Viewed head-on, this 75-foot-long arrangement is a riot of texture; only from a bird's-eye view does the intricacy of the garden reveal itself: Each bed is a circle, overlapping precisely with the next to create a sweeping geometric design.

Beneath a tall catalpa along a garden path, an oak-leaf hydrangea. Juliana Sohn

Nearby, Alesch and Standefer have positioned two rocking chairs beneath the boughs of an ancient-looking apple tree. They like to sit there and watch the wind blowing through the pale purple teasel, alone but for the murder of crows that guard their property. “Part of the power of having gardens with some scale is being in them, not just tending them,” Standefer says. And yet she is already fantasizing about their next project: expanding the fledgling orchard to form long allées of fruit trees. “We’ve always been more maximalist than minimalist,” she adds, “in our practice — and as people.”

Alice Newell-Hanson is the senior digital features editor of T Magazine.

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