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LOOKING AHEAD

A NEW PUBLIC GARDEN TAKES ROOT

A group of garden- and nature-lovers came together to create a public garden—complete with a meadow designed by a rock star plantsman.

BY THERESE CIESINSKI



Above, left: Piet Oudolf, designer of the new meadow, helped place and install the first 17,000 plants last fall. **Above, right:** Volunteers assisted with planting the meadow, which is anticipated to open in the summer of 2019.

DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS, exquisite beaches and inland waterways draw bumper-to-bumper traffic to Delaware's Bethany Beach. But soon crowds will come for a new attraction about 11 miles away in Dagsboro, population 878: a world-class botanic garden with a meadow by famed designer Piet Oudolf.

Delaware Botanic Gardens (DBG) at Pepper Creek in Dagsboro is a lesson in how a small group of people can make big things happen. These garden- and nature-lovers, many of them retired professionals from major East Coast cities, decided in 2012 that the area needed

a public garden. So they made an ambitious plan to create one from a former soybean field adjacent to a tributary of Indian River Bay, with 37 acres showcasing the coastal plain habitats and topography of southern Delaware, including native woodlands, inland dunes, and 1,000 feet of tidal waterfront. Then they set about getting public support and raising funds for it. Sussex County Land Trust leased the land to the garden for 99 years at \$1 a year. Six years and multiple fundraising endeavors later, the group had the money to begin the design and installation. Ongoing fundraising



Left: In addition to the meadow (at center), the plan for the 37-acre botanical garden also includes a coastal living garden, a council ring, a demonstration and display garden, a woodland garden, and a magnolia forest.

and an endowment will pay for maintenance and operations.

The master plan is by landscape architecture firm Robinson Anderson Summers, and the architecture firm Lake Flato is designing the visitor center and meeting and event spaces. Then there's Oudolf's meadow. "It's the crown jewel of the garden," says Gregory Tepper, DBG's director of horticulture. The meadow's undulating design covers 2 acres with flowing blocks of color and multiseasonal interest.

How did a small, wannabe garden snag Oudolf, renowned for New York City's High Line and Chicago's Lurie Garden? "If you don't ask, you don't get," says advisory council member and meadow project assistant Barbara Katz, a landscape designer and an acquaintance of Oudolf's. "Why not aim for the top?" Tepper was skeptical, but Katz asked anyway. Both were astonished when Oudolf said yes. Oudolf says he was attracted to the project because it is a public garden, and he likes the enthusiasm of people working together for the public good.

In September 2017, under Oudolf's direction and with assistance from perennial plant expert Roy Diblik, 100 volunteers planted 17,000 plants, including hoary skullcap and Eastern bee balm, in a third of the meadow. Volunteers came from as far as Chicago, eager to be part of an Oudolf project. When finished, the meadow will have 65,000 herbaceous flowering plants and grasses, 85 percent of them native.

Tepper says the DBG will be a year-round garden where horticulture meets ecology. "We define beauty at DBG as not only aesthetics but also the ability to support life; to be respectful of resources and other beings that inhabit the space—bees, insects, birds, wildlife, and the life in the soil," he says. Tepper is hopeful the garden will open in summer of 2019. This first phase of a 10-year plan will debut the meadow, the woodland, an entry garden, and a wetland classroom. delawaregardens.org



BEAUTIFUL, DEER-RESISTANT, AND NATIVE

These eight deer-resistant U.S.-native plants are part of the Piet Oudolf meadow at Delaware Botanic Gardens.

1. *Baptisia* 'Purple Smoke'
2. *Echinacea purpurea* 'Fatal Attraction'
(an Oudolf introduction, shown above)
3. *Gaura lindheimeri*
4. *Monarda bradburiana*
5. *Scutellaria incana*
6. *Vernonia lettermannii* 'Iron Butterfly'
7. *Bouteloua curtipendula*
8. *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Standing Ovation'