



BEAUTY
of the
WILD

A LIFE DESIGNING LANDSCAPES

INSPIRED BY NATURE

DARREL MORRISON

LIBRARY OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE HISTORY

AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS



Mesic prairie section with Curtis Prairie beyond, Native Plant Garden, University of Wisconsin–Madison Arboretum. Photograph by Robert Jaeger.



Historic Greene Prairie restoration, UW Arboretum. Photograph by Darrel Morrison.



Central vista, Native Plant Garden, UW Arboretum, showing wetland, mesic prairies, bur oak savanna (*right*), black oak savanna (*left*), and oak-hickory forest. Photograph by Robert Jaeger.

eloquently expresses this process of education, noting that “our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.”²² For me, the next step involved thinking about the processes that led to patterns: microenvironmental differences, varying means of reproduction, plant migration, competition, and succession.

The text for the plant ecology class was John T. Curtis’s *The Vegetation of Wisconsin*, published in 1959, shortly before his premature death. The book is a lasting legacy, reflecting the author’s encyclopedic knowledge of Wiscon-



Islands of big bluestem, Canada wildrye, and Indiangrass with Alexander Liberman's *Adam* (1970), Storm King Art Center. © 2020 The Alexander Liberman Trust. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson. Courtesy Storm King Art Center.

left, Tal Streeter's playful red vertical zigzag *Endless Column*. I continued on as the driveway curved up Museum Hill, with a fifty-year-old planting of pines with pole-like trunks on my right, and Kenneth Snelson's *Free Ride Home*, a composition of aluminum tubes with stainless steel cable, down a slope to my left. At the top of the hill, I arrived at a Normandy-style chateau built in 1935, now both a museum and the administrative building for the art center.

Storm King had been founded in 1960 by Ralph E. Ogden and H. Peter Stern as a museum for Hudson River School painting, but by the following year both had decided to focus on modern sculpture. William A. Rutherford Sr., who had been involved in shaping the Storm King landscape from the beginning, once described the Art Center as "one big overall sculpture into which you add other sculptures." As David and Bill explained at our first meeting,

the proposed effort to establish large sweeps of native tall grasses to contrast with broad curving "rivers" of mown turfgrass had the potential to reinforce, and even intensify, the concept of Storm King as "one big overall sculpture." Although captivated by the prospect of working toward that ambitious goal, I cautioned that it wouldn't be quick and it wouldn't be easy.

On our initial tour of the site that day, I noted that non-native weed species thrived in all sunny areas that were not regularly mowed. We would be fighting a battle with spotted knapweed in dry areas and purple loosestrife in wet, poorly drained ones. From my experience on the farm, I knew that weeds seemed to be suppressed in areas planted in the perennial forage crop, alfalfa, for two or more years. Instead of plunging into a program of planting native grass mixes the next spring, I recommended seeding cover crops as "placeholders," and native grasses later. In spring 1997, upland sites would be



Peninsulas of native grasses in South Fields with Mark di Suvero's *Pyramidian* (1987/1998) and *Beethoven's Quartet* (2003), Storm King Art Center. *Pyramidian*, gift of the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation; *Beethoven's Quartet*, courtesy Tippet Rise Art Center. © Mark di Suvero, courtesy the artist and Spacetime C.C. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson. Courtesy Storm King Art Center.



Prairie cordgrass with yellow coneflower in the wet-mesic prairie section, Native Plant Garden, UW Arboretum. Photograph by Susan Carpenter.



Long prairie vista with bluejoint grass in the wetland area, Native Plant Garden, UW Arboretum. Photograph by Susan Carpenter.

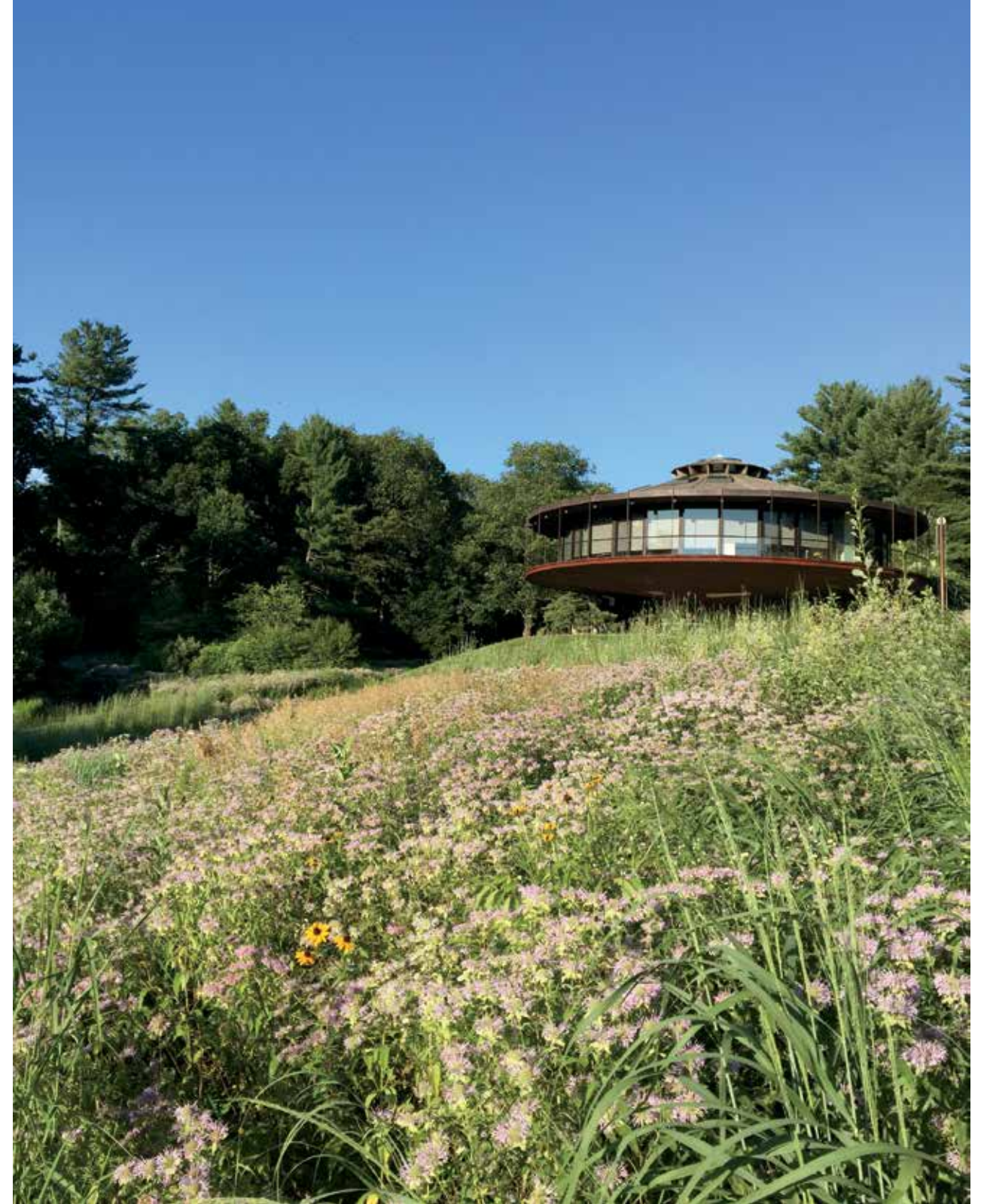
ciation process was not present. That year, I kept in touch with a realtor who was on the lookout for land that might interest me. After locating many properties with deal-breaking drawbacks, she finally sent photos of a twenty-acre parcel that seemed promising. Sixteen acres of the site were occupied by a rich hardwood forest on a steep north-facing slope, which extended over a ridge and partway down a south-facing slope, where paper birches and scattered red cedars feathered into a rocky dry prairie. As I studied the photographs from faraway Georgia, it was apparent that this was a high-quality natural prairie remnant with all the “right” colors of little bluestem, side-oats grama grass, northern prairie dropseed, and Indiangrass. Once again, I was seduced

from the original lot to the adjacent one, which was already in a semi-wild state. An annual mowing program on that lot has revealed a traditional dry-laid stone wall, a reminder of an agricultural past. A zone of aging forest trees occupies the southern section of the site. From the edge of those woods, a new cluster of fifty young, early-successional trembling aspens emerges into the open field. Under the canopy of the old forest trees, twenty-five shade-tolerant American beech saplings have been planted. One day, they will become a part of the canopy, and their horizontal branches will retain their copper-turning-to-tan leaves through the winter.

Neither of us is enamored with cultivars of native species and we agree



Early-successional species: daisy fleabane, wild bergamot, and black-eyed Susan, Round House. Photograph by Jonathan D. Lippincott.



View to the Round House. Photograph by Jonathan D. Lippincott.

just outside my window. A perky striped chipmunk scurries across the rocky ground, leaps effortlessly onto the cut stump of an ancient limber pine, and suns himself on the warm, flat surface. A white butterfly flits by.

I step outside my room onto a raised stone terrace with two-inch-tall silver sage plants and flat mats of pussytoes growing in the spaces between the gray to brownish stone slabs. Over a decade has passed since I first designed these terraces. I walk down five broad stone steps on the west side, past the clump of crisp, rattling balsamroot leaves and the perky chipmunk's sunny pine stump.

A two-foot-wide, dry-laid stone path winds through the clusters of dwarf gnarly pines to the west. I remember how much fun it was to lay out that path,



View of the native landscape from the guesthouse terrace, Montana ranch. Photograph by Carol Betsch.



Limber pines, balsamroot, and native grasses near the guesthouse, Montana ranch. Photograph by Carol Betsch.

placing colored flags through the clumps of pines, alternately in the open, then enclosed in a small pine grove, and then out into the open again. Sunlight and shadow, prospect and refuge. The curves in the narrow path are not broad, river-like curves but those of a winding stream. There is a bit of mystery where low-branched pines partially block the view and then open up to reveal blue-gray mountain peaks on the distant horizon. Next, a rustic circular wall is revealed, a council ring, twelve feet in diameter with a three-foot-wide entrance