



Noël van Mierlo

It is intriguing that, early in conversation, Noël van Mierlo starts to talk about someone else. Intriguing, as Noël comes across very much as a perfectionist, a craftsman who pays enormous attention to every detail and does not commit to anything unless he can do it really well. Perfectionists often have a problem with delegation, but clearly not Noël. ‘I want to be able to make a good product,’ he says, ‘and that can mean collaboration.’ The someone else Noël was so keen to talk about was the botanist and plant specialist Ruurd van Donkelaar, whom he employs as a planting design consultant. He is clearly the most important of several such specialists. ‘Working with them makes sense, as each one of us can only know so much,’ says Noël. ‘I consider myself a director. I write a script, I look after composition and spatial relations, then, if needed, I search for collaborators who can make it work. When I was younger, and working as part of my parents’ ambitious landscape company, I was surrounded by specialists, a lot of them older and wiser than I was. So, collaborating to get the job done really comes naturally to me.’

Who then is Ruurd van Donkelaar, of whom Noël speaks so warmly? He is essentially a planting design consultant, a botanist and grower, from a family which has been involved with plants for several generations. ‘I saw him give a lecture at least 12 years ago, and I asked if we could work together as I thought we would fit well,’ says Noël. Since then, he has involved Ruurd in his projects on many occasions. Noël designs the garden plan with the routes and the basic spatial layout, and handpicks the first layer of trees and shrubs as part of the architecture, but discusses them with Ruurd. The lower, perennial layer is then very often left to Ruurd.

There is a certain humility here, a case of knowing one’s limits. Landscape architects, and garden designers even more so, generally expect to do the planting and are certainly expected to do so by the public, but specialist knowledge recognized and bought in inevitably leads to better results.

‘To be really good with plants you have to be obsessed. Ruurd (pictured right) understands deeply how nature works,’ says Noël. ‘Crucially, having his knowledge in my pocket makes me free, and it gives me confidence to work with gardens on every soil.’



Noël’s gardens are perhaps the least Dutch of those in this book. With their naturalistic water bodies, absence of straight lines, combination of organic form and bold design, and above all their use of rock, they belong to a particular globally popular genre with an ancestry perhaps best summed up by the Chinese concept of mountain-and-water which is at the core of the Asian tradition, but which has, over a long period, seeped into the Western consciousness too. They are reminiscent of early 20th-century rock and water gardens or the so-called Pacific North West style of that region of the United States. ‘A lot of my clients have lived or travelled abroad, often in the US or the Far East,’ Noël says. ‘They recognize their life abroad in my work.’

Rock is that most alien of materials in Holland. ‘I work with it because nobody else does here and I love the material,’ he says. ‘Rock is somewhere between hard and soft landscaping, a perfect tool to blend with different elements, and they give a garden age and weight.’ In many ways Noël’s work is not particularly Dutch, but reflects instead the experiences and appreciations of someone who has travelled. ‘I am inspired by architects in places like the western United States or Norway,’ he says. ‘One step and they have to fit into nature. They dance with nature but find a place for the architecture to flourish. I love that.’

Of course, these are two places where there is a lot of rock and they are far removed from the lush Dutch lowlands. Nevertheless, people travel, and inevitably travel shapes their experiences and, for those in the creative professions, their sense of what is aesthetically pleasing and what they want to create. Noël spent a year living in Canada, and describes how he misses its vast forests which are not to be found in The Netherlands.

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The interweaving of water, land, water plants and trees, with a pavilion as the focal point, evokes East Asian gardens, and the harmonious balancing of elements central to that tradition.



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- 01
A garden pool with gravel edges that make it look truly natural.
- 02
A tussock of the grass *Hakenochloa macra*.
- 03
A branch of tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*) in autumn colour.
- 04
Ginkgo biloba turned butter yellow in autumn.
- 05
This plan of the garden clearly shows the structure.
- 06
Rectilinear geometries make an effective contrast to the naturalistic planting.



Noël's garden design work is in many ways very global, and that is perhaps itself very Dutch; this is a country and culture that has nearly always looked outwards, enthused by and borrowing from all that the world has to offer. Clients, too, often want their gardens to remind them of more dramatic environments than their homeland; Noël has one who likes walking in the Alps, and wanted him to bring something of the feeling of the mountains into the garden. The rocks he uses are sourced in the Belgian Ardennes. They appear in his gardens in a way that is remarkably natural, not just fine-looking specimens but accompanying smaller pieces and the finer particles which they break down naturally into, so the overall effect is that of a garden built on this material as its bedrock. Ground cover and other smaller plants weave in and out of the stone. Ruurd's influence is what ensures the presence of these low-growing plants, a level of detail a great many garden designers all too often rather ignore.

Noël's father ran a garden design and build company. 'My childhood garden was an experience of living in a designed garden,' he recalls. As he grew up he started working as a landscaper at different companies, then joined his parents' company and took it over in 2005. 'I was the son of the boss, which makes you alone,' he says, 'but leading a team of experienced landscapers was an important experience. My father's work was all about craftsmanship and he loved the building aspect of our trade. I like to think that my gardens are a celebration of craftsmanship too. The structures I build are "naked" in that I want people to see how they are built, and to show honest craftsmanship.' At this time he entered numerous competitions as he believed that most landscape companies in the country were tending to work in the same way, and he felt that competitions were a means of showing people a different approach.

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Bronze-purple Ajuga reptans 'Atropurpurea' and grey-leaved Nepeta racemosa 'Superba'.

- 01
Luzula sylvatica
with *Ajuga reptans*
'Atropurpurea'.
- 02
Trees break the line of
the boundary and so
help make the garden
feel limitless.
- 03
Blue-flowered
Ceratostigma
plumbaginoides.
- 04
Carex morrowii
'Gilt Edge'.



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- 05
Traditional pavers allow
for creative feathered
edgings.
- 06
Strong lines contrast with
naturalistic planting.
- 07
Rough paths gather
moss at the edges.
- 08
Nepeta racemosa
'Superba'.
- 09
Hart's-tongue fern
(*Phyllitis scolopendrium*).



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In early 2012, following the economic crisis of the years before, Noël had to go out of business. ‘It was the worst nightmare, having to close down and lay people off,’ he says. Some hard and deep rethinking followed, and he decided to become a designer rather than a contractor. So, later that year, he started up a design office. In the second year of the new business, Noël was asked to design a garden where there was a leak in the pond – and as so often seems to happen in the garden business, one thing led to another. He and the client discussed the design of the garden, and the latter said he liked the Eastern look because of his extensive travels in Asia. Sensing a great opportunity, Noël decided to make a proposal and draw the best garden he could imagine. This commission turned out to be an ideal breakthrough, with a client who enabled him to reinvent himself and show what he could do. He filmed and documented everything over the two and a half years it took to create the garden; the main part was finished in 2015, and in 2018 he started on the ambitious front garden.

That garden has become known as ‘The Japanese Water Garden’, which is perhaps somewhat unfortunate as so many gardens in the West with this appellation are little more than clichés, and there is a question mark over whether it is really possible to make an authentic Japanese garden outside Japan. Noël says, ‘If you avoid the clichés of a Japanese garden you are left with an adventure, the chance of doing something different but with a strong sense of harmony. There is a Japanese aesthetic at the core of the garden combined with a sense of the Western world’s modernity.’ Harmony is expressed by balance, with everything equally important. Entered for the British Society of Garden Designers awards in 2019, the garden won Best International Garden and the People’s Choice Award.

01
The spacings of the wooden post barrier slowly change, altering our perspective.

02
Rocks provide escape routes and perches for amphibians.

03
A clump of *Pontederia cordata* expands slowly into the water.



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Noël began doing water gardens a long time ago. For him, water acts as a focus for his aim to ‘create a place where you can experience nature and the seasons, the different types of light, different plants – the pond, the boardwalk, these are all magnets that lure you into the garden and tempt you to explore it’.

This is perhaps the key to his gardens – exploring them is more like unrolling an Oriental scroll painting than walking across or through a plan. Water bodies that dominate gardens force you to walk around them, so the exploration-journey becomes something which has a beginning and an end, again like a scroll.

Another success for him is blurring boundaries so that it is not possible to discern where the garden ends, and a tree which is actually three or four gardens distant becomes part of the view. The occasional spontaneous appearance of interesting and attractive wild flora in his gardens is also a kind of blurring of culture and nature as well as being complementary to his planting. To successfully blend the experience of the garden with that of the surrounding world is a kind of subtle triumph for Noël’s modest approach to crafting space.

01
Straight lines set up a creative tension with natural irregularities.

02
Native grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*; this is cultivar ‘Bronzeschleier’.

03
The seedheads of *Heuchera micrantha*.

04
Acaena microphylla ‘Kupferteppich’, a low ground-cover plant.

05
The even lower *Leptinella squalida*.



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The design of the boardwalks adds a subtle Japanese touch.

07
Taxus baccata makes a useful negative space.

08
Marginal plants such as *Pontederia cordata* blur pond boundaries.

09
Rock and irregular stone brings a touch of the wild to a suburban location.



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