



Taking the Garden **To Work**

The Van Zelst
headquarters



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We need to change our thinking where the autumn garden is concerned. The year is "winding down," we say, a reflection of our vision of September and October as bit players in a show that stars June and July. Certainly winter, the villain, is lurking in the wings, soon to swoop onstage and wreak havoc, but for now, the drama is still proceeding smoothly and moving towards a brilliant finale. Why shouldn't we see the year as "winding up?"

Think about the weather. Does Chicagoland have anything more glorious than October? The temperatures are balmy, the skies are a rich haze-free blue, and the humidity is blissfully low. Consider the colors. Vibrant reds, purples, oranges and yellows, made even more outstanding when set off by neutral browns and beige, add to our impression of the whole world as some kind of magic show, changing daily for our benefit. (Catch it quick before it closes!)

Reds, oranges and burnished golds transform the Van Zelst headquarters into an autumn showpiece. Maples and ornamental grasses such as the *Pennisetum* in the foreground are mainstays of the landscape, but closer viewing reveals appealing color shifts in plants such as hostas and bergenia (above).

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The serviceberry (*Amelanchier*) is a native tree that offers four seasons of garden interest. In autumn, the leaves turn exciting shades of yellow, orange and red. Tightly grouped hostas and bergenias provide groundcover.

Perhaps our problem is that we just don't plan for autumn the way we plan for spring and summer. Come September, we turn fatalistic about our plants, leaving them to sprout the occasional blossom, and then toss in a few chrysanthemum mounds for new color. The effect is rather disjointed and never truly satisfying. Also contributing to our lack of vision is the fact that we just don't visit all that many truly fine autumn gardens.

One place to go for inspiration is the headquarters of Van Zelst, Inc., a landscape design-build firm based in Wadsworth. Located right on Highway 41, the main office building is a corporate headquarters that looks like a home—which was the intent. "I wanted the main building—which is our design studio—to look like a residence surrounded by a variety of gardens," says owner David Van Zelst. "That way, clients would be able to walk around, see plants in different settings and envision how they might appear and perform on their own properties."

The site was designed for year-round impact, beginning in spring when thousands of daffodils and spring-flowering bulbs swoop up a low incline to the building's entrance. Curves and bold mass plantings also typify the summer's display of daylilies, hostas, peonies, and annuals which enfold the studio building in ever-changing colors and textures.

With the arrival of autumn, the landscape changes dramatically. Maples and serviceberries—Van Zelst's favorite trees—put on brilliant reds and orange while the ornamental grasses (cultivars of *Miscanthus* and *Pennisetum*) cheerfully wave their feathery plumes. Even some of the hostas have exciting autumn color, turning yellow and bronze as the temperatures drop. Bergenias turn red. At the base of the slope, next to the parking lot, a mini-grove of honey locust and maple shelters low-growing



Thoughtfully juxtaposing plants with an eye towards their contrasting heights, forms and textures will create a composition that is pleasing, even when the colors aren't showy.

shrubs such as fothergilla, which offers a kaleidoscope of colors, and the now-burgundy oak leaf hydrangea.

All of this takes place on a grand scale and befits a setting where the space is ample. Behind the studio, however, a tiny U-shaped inset in the building's rear wall offers an intriguing example of a design that could provide a small city garden or townhouse space with four seasons of interest.

Here, a formally designed space is outlined with carefully clipped boxwood which surrounds a planting of tall ornamental grasses. A carpet of *Vinca minor* knits the design together. Particularly attractive is the formal/informal contrast of the geometric boxwood hedge and the tall free-flowing, dancing grasses. Since the vinca and boxwood are evergreen and the grasses are left in place until March, this makes for a garden with true year-round appeal.

The view from within the building was also considered. Since winter garden enjoyment is mainly a matter of looking out the window, it helps that a pair of tall spruce and a honey locust were planted along the property's back fence where they could serve to draw the eye out over the boxwood and grasses and create a complete, if restricted, composition.

Every fine garden has a force behind it, which in this case is David Van Zelst and his life-long interest in plants. That Van Zelst would become a landscape architect seems, in retrospect, foreordained. While still a child, he began growing orchids in a bathroom and when that space overflowed, his ever-supportive parents built a greenhouse. In high school he was the classic kid with a lawn mower, cutting grass

around Glenview to earn a buck. Four years at Purdue followed and led to a degree in landscape architecture. Back in Chicagoland, he went into the landscaping business, housing his staff at one point in a metal pole barn and eventually expanding to his present, more congenial quarters.

Life in the green industry is never dull, especially in the Midwest with its extremes of climate and changeable weather. Yet even the thrill of facing down a thunderstorm pales when one day you dig up the bones of a prehistoric monster. It was 1992 and the crew was expanding a small marsh area on its property into a lake when they dug up tusks, a femur and rib sections of two mastodons that had apparently become mired in the marsh's soft soils over 12,000 years ago. Since geologists also discovered the remains of an ancient white spruce forest on the site, Van Zelst jokes that he can now claim a 10,000 year-old history in growing and harvesting spruce trees. (Most of the perennials used in his projects, as well as some of the trees and shrubs, are grown in a nursery at the headquarters.)

Van Zelst describes his design approach as "organized informal," a phrase that would certainly pertain to his work at the headquarters where order plus free-flowing lines are much in evidence. He also loves color, referring to himself as someone for whom "too much color is not enough." For such a sensibility, autumn must surely seem a gift from the gods. To be sure, the colors of autumn are not the colors of spring—nor should they be—but they are rich, warm, and brimming with a life of their own. Enjoy them for what they are and let that be enough.