

PLANT LIFE

SPRING HOME DESIGN 2003

GLASS HOUSES

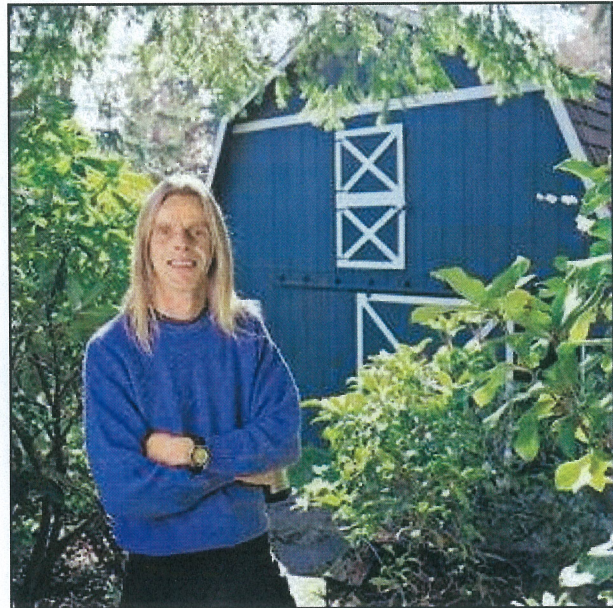
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PHOTOGRAPHED BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

Message From a Master

If you want to save the planet, start with the soil

Landscape contractor and designer Hendrikus Schraven claims he works 24 hours a day, and from the way the phones are ringing and the people are running about in his log house, 800 feet up Issaquah's Tiger Mountain, it appears to be true. Outside, rows of chemical-virgin plants flourish in specially mixed soil, waiting to be installed in clients' gardens. Piles of rich, dark dirt and specially formulated fertilizer fill the three-acre property. Sheds hold equipment to brew "compost tea." Hendrikus and his three cats appear relaxed in the midst of the tumult — probably because cats relax anywhere and the man keeps his mind firmly on the balance of nature, which is both his business and his mission.

His skinny, black jeans, long, gray-blond locks, and intensity of purpose may harken back to the days he played in a band and ran light shows for Pink Floyd and the Jefferson Airplane, but his focus is on nothing less than saving the planet from chemical degradation, one garden at a time.



From China to New York City to Everett, Hendrikus Schraven has spread the gospel of good dirt, urging people to give up chemicals, allow proper drainage and place plants properly to create healthy landscapes.

After leaving school at 15 for life on the rock-band circuit, he ended up in Seattle in the early '70s, looking for work. "I was tired of living at night, working with bands in New York," says Schraven. He found a job with a landscape-maintenance business but was appalled at the general practice of spreading a couple of inches of topsoil over hardpan and plunking in plants. Schraven grew up on a farm in Holland, a low-lying land where centuries of flooding rivers left behind rich deposits. He thought all topsoil was 3 to 4 feet deep and filled with life-giving micronutrients. "If you don't do it right the first time, you've set yourself up for continual disaster," explains Schraven of the landscape practices he despaired over then and today. "The plants suffer, so they're sprayed. The chemical sprays annihilate the beneficial microbes, so the plants decline. All those chemicals run off and pollute the lakes and rivers."

In response, Schraven preaches the gospel of soil, the medium in which air, water and plants come together to create the foundation for healthy landscapes. He concentrates on installing good drainage and putting the right plants in places they'll flourish naturally. His artistry lies in the use of water and stone, working in harmony with nature. His blend of topsoil and organic fertilizer so encourages root growth that lawns stay green throughout the summer with little or no irrigation, and plants grow strong. Such practices, while initially more expensive, are cheaper in the long run because landscapes need less water, fertilizer and maintenance.

While Schraven's intense belief in his own methods and products has raised some eyebrows, his work has won international acclaim and more than 50 awards. Recently he spent nearly a month in China, a guest of the government invited to consult on rejuvenating soils damaged by over-fertilization. The U.S. Forest Service hired him to advise on how to return soil to fertility after the searingly hot Montana Bitter Root fire; New York City asked his help to renew the soil in Battery Park after 9/11.

In the past decade, Schraven has developed a specialty in slope restoration, earning an award from the International Erosion Control Association. The problem grows worse as more areas are paved and developed, leaving less soil to absorb water, resulting in treacherous hillsides that slip-slide away, creating even steeper cliffs denuded of plant cover. Schraven's solution, which he has used to repair slopes in Medina, Everett and Magnolia, is to mimic nature by creating a highly permeable, humus-rich soil that sticks to slopes. He says this special soil "grows plants like cabbages," creating strong root systems that grow quickly to hold the soil in place.

Hendrikus Schraven Landscape Construction & Design has its choice of clients, even with project prices that run between \$20,000 and a million dollars. What can homeowners with small gardens, or small budgets, do to improve the ecological balance in their gardens? Begin with a thick layer of healthy soil set onto a good drainage system, for plants need oxygen just as humans do. Schraven is keen on compost tea to increase the microbial activity in the soil, or "the little critters that cycle the soil." Organic fertilizers with micronutrients feed these critters, who in turn feed the plants. And get rid of the herbicides and pesticides, because you won't need them anymore.

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