



IRENE VIRAG



NEWSDAY PHOTO / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

The slender fiery red foliage of Japanese blood grass, aka *Imperata cylindrica Rubra*, ignites the borders around Javits Lecture Center at Stony Brook University.

## Studiously painted with plants

**A**s an undergraduate more years ago than I would like to count, I attended Boston University, aka BU, or as we not so affectionately called it, Big and Ugly — an uninspired landscape of concrete and trolley cars relieved by little more than urban street trees and the grassy banks of the Charles River.

So perhaps you can imagine my joy now as an adjunct professor — it's hard to reconcile my persona with the title — at Stony Brook University, where my husband and I teach narrative journalism and hope the written word will survive texting.

It's been a while since I last saw BU, and maybe it's burst into flower since my coed days. But by comparison, the SBU campus seemed like Oz — the wizard's hangout, not the TV jail, although the architecture was once described as "neo-penal." We started teaching three Septembers ago, and I was immediately enchanted by the early fall garden outside the Administration Building. It was a tapestry of textures and colors, of trees and shrubs, of

ornamental grasses and sedums and coral bells.

As the semester moved into October and November, our students blossomed and laughed at my husband's jokes and wrote stories that touched us, and if we still didn't think of ourselves as professors we did think of ourselves as teachers. And the landscape softened with the season — like a beauty queen with great cheekbones who ages naturally and doesn't feel the need for Botox.

I knew Stony Brook University hadn't always been that way, but I was still surprised. When I came to Long Island as a reporter in the early 1980s and covered occasional assignments at the school, I felt adrift in a concrete plain pocked with matching buildings. Or as a visiting alumnus from the '70s who lectured at one of our classes recently summed up, "We painted the dirt green for parents weekend."

Now, the campus known as "Mudville" was another world. What impressed me immediately was that the fall gardens were virtually devoid of annuals — of summer bedding plants like petunias and impatiens that have to be ripped out as the season deepens and replaced with chrysanthemums and ornamental cabbage and kale. The trees and shrubs



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Stony Brook president Shirley Strum Kenny admires a Lord Baltimore hibiscus in the entry circle garden. The flowers speak to her commitment to beautify the campus once known as "Mudville."

were still lovely. The tawny fountain grass was gorgeous in its own right, so was the Joe Pye weed as it faded from pinkish purple to russet.

### Someone working magic

It was clear that somebody with an extraordinary sense of design who knew her *Panicum virgatum* from her *Pennisetum alopecuroides* had a hand in these gardens. As it turned out, she did. No less a garden designer than Lynden Miller is the brains behind the beauty of the Stony Brook campus.

Lynden, a petite woman with striking white hair, a quick sense of humor and a let's-get-to-work manner, has more credits than a

roomful of PhDs. She's also the director of the Conservatory Garden in Central Park, and she's designed and restored gardens at The New York Botanical Garden, the Museum of Modern Art, Hunter College and Princeton and Columbia universities. Her new book, "Parks, Plants and People: Beautifying the Urban Landscape (W.W. Norton & Co.), featuring a chapter on Stony Brook, comes out next year.

Which is why I'm walking around the campus with her in the changing light of an autumn afternoon and it's like strolling through a one-woman show with the artist as your guide. "I view every garden I create as a

painting," confirms Lynden, who started beautifying the Stony Brook landscape in 2000. "I used to do huge collages. That's sort of what this is. I guess I'm painting with plants. But this is more exciting. I've truly found my medium."

We're approaching Javits Lecture Center, where the

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### Coming Friday

In Your LI Home, Garden Detective Jessica Damiano will show you an easier way to store garden tools for the winter.



gardens were planted last spring. This is Lynden's first look at them in autumn. "Javits was like a German bunker," she says, smiling. "It even had a huge concrete moat." When John Belle of Beyer Blinder Belle — the Manhattan architects who created the six-acre Academic Mall and designed the Humanities Building — took it away, Lynden had a canvas. Now it's a painting.

"Wow, don't those grasses look wonderful," she says. Swaths of Japanese blood grass curve through the wide perennial bed and literally glow in the autumn sun and I think that van Gogh would have liked to paint them. Pink and red Knockout roses color the slope and soften the building that stands like a rising island in the middle of a concrete plaza. Lynden pulls out her digital camera and snaps a picture. "Everything is filling in very well," she says.

A breeze stirs, and the plantings nod in agreement. Each of the three entrances highlights plants attuned to the richness of color and texture that is one of Lynden's design signatures. One entrance features the green of native holly and the yellows of *Helenium* Prairie Sunset, and variegated Color Guard yuccas that will more than hold their own through winter. Low-growing heucheras unroll a purple carpet at the feet of fleecy *Persicaria* Firetail and soft fuzzy grasses.

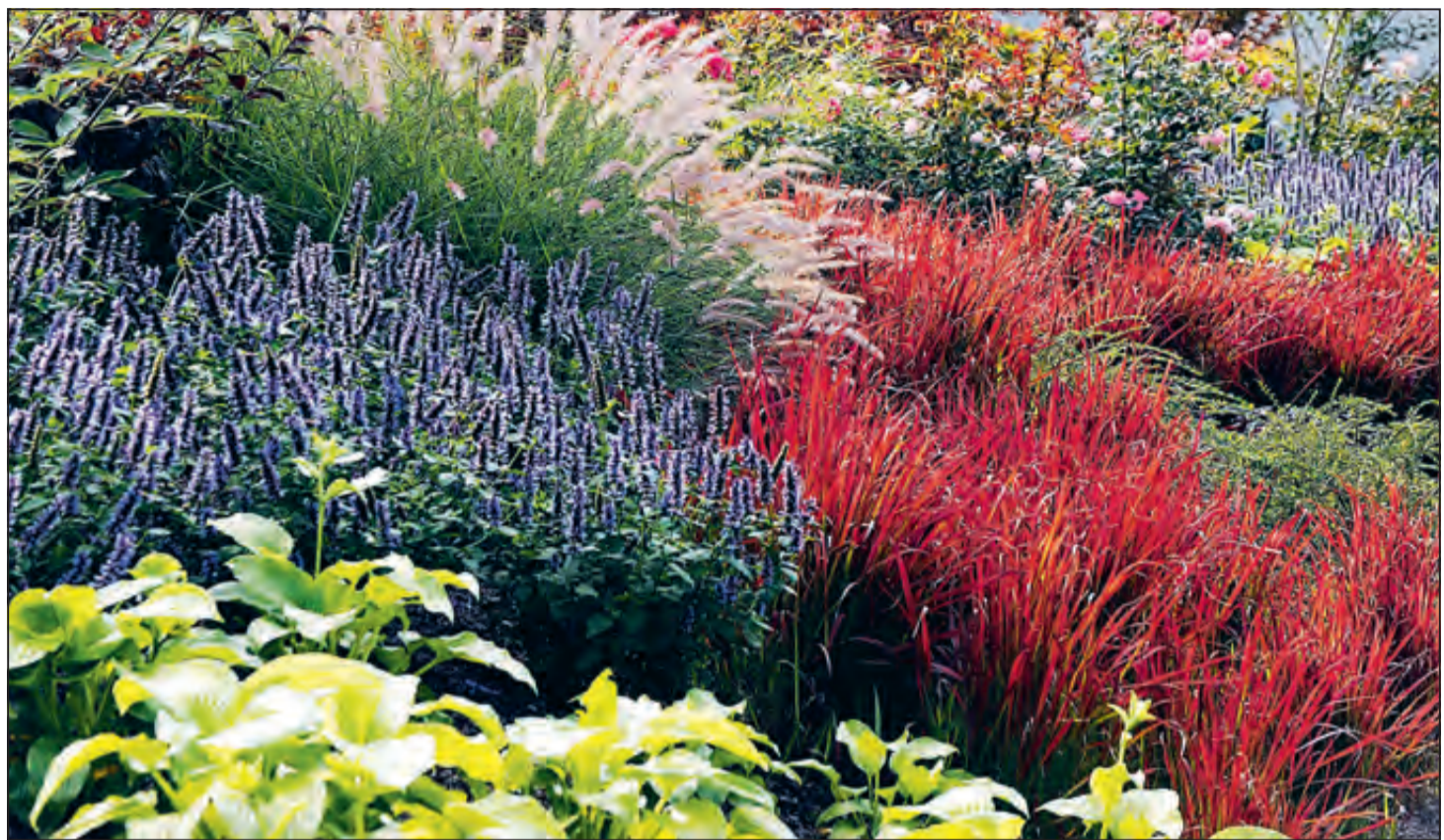
#### Correcting, dividing

As we walk around, Lynden is quick to enthuse, but she's also critical. I can relate — whenever I see something that needs tweaking in the garden my husband says I'm being negative. He's got an optimism problem. In the garden as in life, not everything works.

I feel justified as Lynden points out that the *Hosta plantaginea* — the old-fashioned fragrant August lily — could use dividing and should be switched with some Plum Pudding heucheras getting too much irrigation. She's big on dividing, and you should listen to her. "We mostly use perennials, and they're supposed to be divided. It's good for the plants, it's good for the pocketbook. We use what we have here and make them go further."

As we make our way around the building, the palette subtly changes from yellows to purples, with smoke bush and hydrangeas and agastache and *Salvia* Blue Hill, which Lynden calls "a graduation plant" because it rules in May and June. But if you cut it back in mid-July, it will bloom again and make autumn look like spring.

She's knocked out by Knockout roses — who isn't? — and if she has a favorite plant at Javits, it's the Japanese blood grass, aka *Imperata cylindrica* Rubra. "Let's have more ribbons of Imperata," she tells her assistant, Ronda Brands, and landscape contractor John Carlstrom, who've joined us. "It's deliberate and so effective — we should have it on all



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Pink shrub roses and blue salvia mingle with fountain grasses and ribbons of red Imperata to create a late-season tapestry.



Where concrete once reigned, left, perennial gardens were planted this spring, still offering a profusion of color and textures in fall.



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three sides of the building. You just can't go wrong with that plant. I say when in doubt, plant more Imperata ribbons."

Lynden sketches in a notebook and jots notes as we wander toward the Humanities Building, stopping along the way to admire the browning seed heads of the Joe Pye weed. "Do you want us to cut it down yet?" John asks. Lynden considers this carefully. "It still has a nice structure. Give it another week or so."

John, who has a 21-person crew maintaining the grounds, is another divide-and-conquer proponent. "It's the way of the garden," he says. "Divide to multiply. We move things around all the time instead of buying new plants. Nothing goes to waste."

Throughout the campus and the seasons, the results testify to Lynden's talent and the vision she shares with outgoing university president Shirley Strum Kenny. "Others may not have understood how dehumanizing all that concrete was. But Shirley Kenny did. And everyone who studies here or works here — now and in the future —

should thank her."

#### 'Everything connects'

I caught up with Shirley a few days later, and we toured the beds that bloom outside her book-lined office in the Administration Building. The red of the Japanese blood grass and the big ruffled flowers of the perennial Lord Baltimore hibiscus echoed the red accents and trim of the Wang Center across the way. I thought of something Lynden had told me. "This red picks up that red. Everything connects and reflects and works together."

"When I accepted this job, one of the first things I thought was, this is the ugliest place I'd ever seen," says Shirley, a native Texan who still has a soft accent and wears a Southwestern silver lizard pin on her lapel. "There was nothing inviting — not a bench or a chair or table, certainly no flowers. The buildings were plain ugly, the campus had no center, and the mall was just blacktop. When Lynden arrived, she talked about plants no one had ever heard of be-

fore. It was very exciting."

Now, about 5,000 plants garland Javits. And another 20,000 — cherry laurels and oak-leaved hydrangeas and red-stemmed dogwoods and Japanese anemones and liriop and Russian sage — grow throughout the more than two acres of gardens that gentle the Main Entry Drive and the beds around the Staller Center. And there's a tiered watercourse, "the stony brook," bordered by cascading grasses and a paved walkway sloping down to another garden in the entry circle.

Both the garden designer who paints with plants and the educator who grows cactuses think the university's landscape draws students. "SAT scores and enrollment have gone up since we started beautifying the campus," Shirley says. "I couldn't swear that there's a direct cause and effect, but I believe there is. What kind of learning can go on in a place that looks like a prison, which is how this campus once looked."

Lynden points to Javits. "The garden is lovely to look at whether you're rushing by or have time to sit for awhile. That's

why we put in benches. It sends a message to the students: We care about you, we're thinking about the quality of your life."

One of our students, Lauren Sarakos, a 22-year-old English major who knows she won't get extra credit for this, transferred to Stony Brook a few years ago and commutes from Centereach. "I like walking around campus to see how pretty everything looks," she told me. "It's not an institution with one concrete building after another. I see Javits on the way to my class on John Milton, and I can't believe how beautiful it is now."

I agree. My husband and I have soft spots for the kids we teach, for the students we see passing by as we sit on a bench near the mall. We see them eager, laughing, texting, flirting, talking about politics and sports and social events and assignments — with the real world still at bay. They are so young and they have such promise.

And it helps them to be in a place where red calls to red and ribbons of Imperata glow, where roots grow deep and everything connects.