

Landscape Perspectives | Amsterdam & The Hague
Naturalistic planting

landscape architects

edla

Summer 2026

By Michael Grimshaw

Earlier this year a few of us swapped the office for three days in The Hague and Amsterdam, on a study trip to see Dutch naturalistic planting in the flesh rather than in books.

All images:
Groene Mient, The Hague
Image credit: EDLA

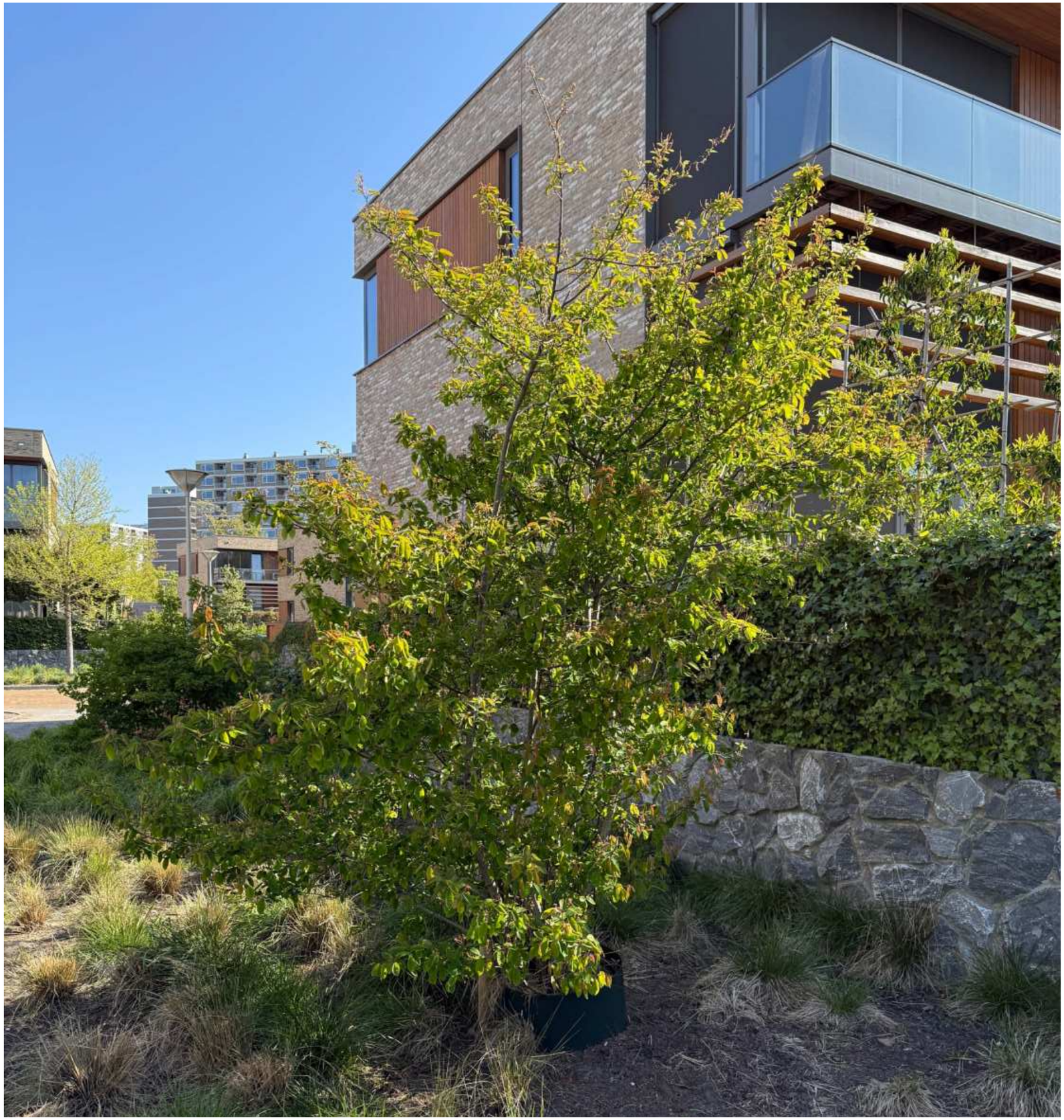
The Netherlands has basically been the engine room of this whole style for the last fifty years. The “Dutch Wave” that came out of designers like Piet Oudolf, Henk Gerritsen and Ton ter Linden changed how everyone thinks about perennials, grasses and letting a border look a bit scruffy in winter without panicking about it. We wanted to see what still sets Dutch planting apart from what we do here, and what we could genuinely bring back and apply.

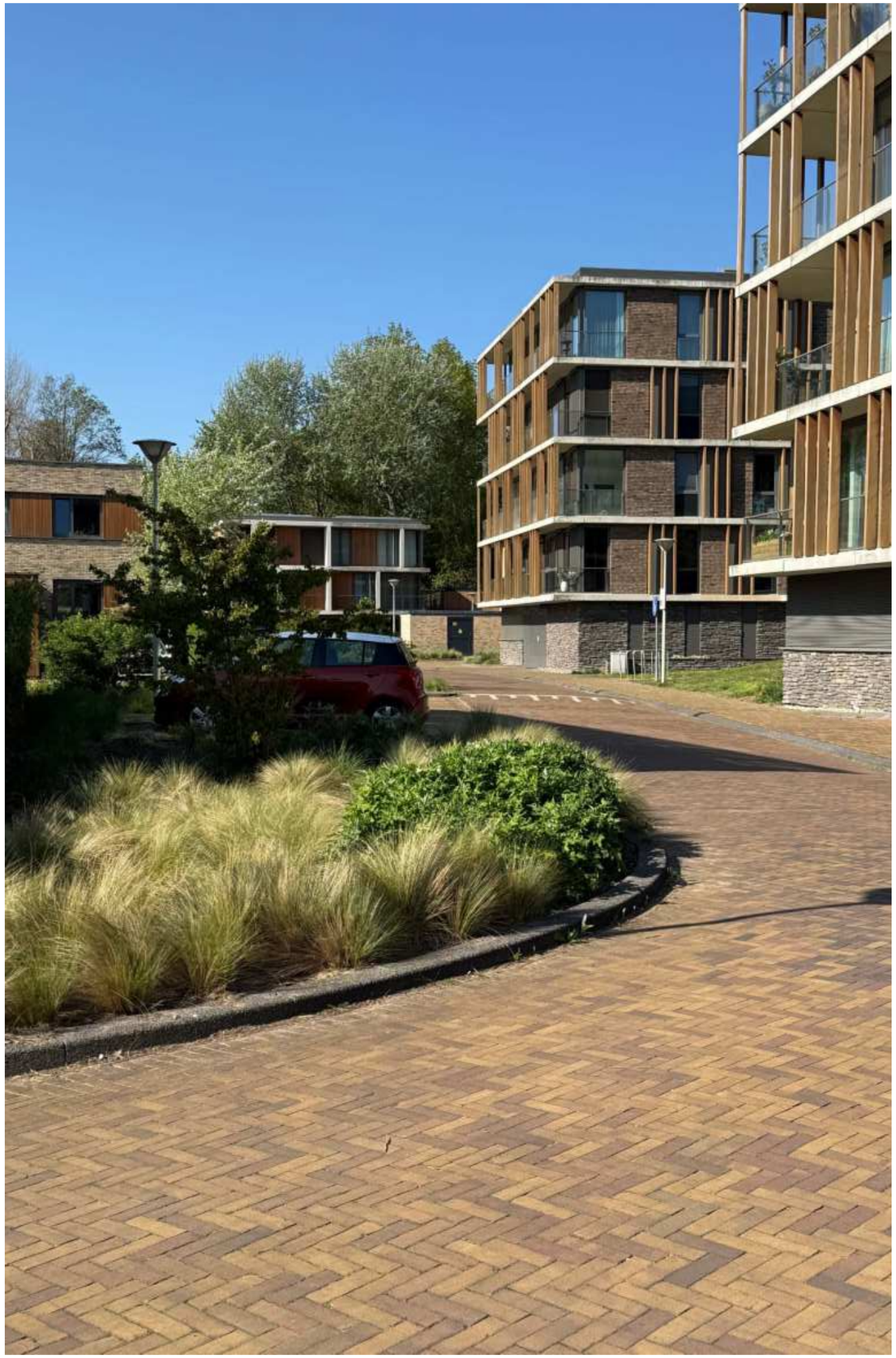
We visited three quite different sites. The dune-valley streetscape at Duinvallei in Kijkduin, the communal garden at Limoenhoef (part of the Groene Mient eco-housing project in The Hague), and the ecologically managed meadows of Vondelpark in Amsterdam. Between them you get the full range, from a council-led masterplan, to a garden built by residents themselves, to a nineteenth-century park being reworked bit by bit through a more naturalistic, hands-off approach.

Duinvallei:
Letting the landscape make the decisions

Duinvallei sits within the wider Duinslag development in Kijkduin, on what used to be sports fields at the edge of The Hague’s dune belt. Rather than treating the dunes as scenery to be kept at arm’s length, the masterplan took the dune valley itself as the whole basis for the public realm. Open, sandy, windswept stretches sit right next to denser wooded pockets, and the ground genuinely moves between wet and dry, high and low, without much apology.

What really struck me was how little effort had gone into softening the transitions between dune grassland and scrub. It was rough, and it was clearly meant to be. That’s a useful challenge to how we often approach things here, where naturalistic schemes on new developments tend to get quietly tidied into a “meadow look” that reads as designed the moment you look at it properly. Duinvallei is a good example of landscape character genuinely driving a housing layout, rather than being planting dressing added at the end.







Groene Miент:
Planting as something you build together, not hand over

The garden at Limoenhoef was probably the thing that stuck with me most. It's part of the 33-home Groene Mient scheme in the Vruchtenbuurt, and the 3,500m² communal garden wasn't handed to residents as a finished product. It was designed with them, through a permaculture-led process where dozens of future residents worked out the paths, the planting zones and where new trees should go, before anything was actually planted. The ditch running alongside it was reworked into a proper native-planted bank, yellow flag iris, purple loosestrife, meadowsweet, developed jointly with the council, plus wadis to capture and soak away rainwater on site.

The planting itself is looser and considerably more productive than anything we'd normally specify. Fruit trees, brambles, Japanese wineberry, figs and nuts, all mixed through the ornamental and native structure, and maintained by the residents rather than a contractor. It's not naturalistic planting in the strict Oudolf sense, it's closer to permaculture, but the underlying lesson still applies. When people are genuinely involved in designing something, they'll tolerate, even value, a level of informality and seasonal change that would generate complaints on a scheme where the planting simply arrives finished. A lot of naturalistic planting on residential schemes here doesn't fail because the design is wrong, it fails because nobody explained to residents why the border looks the way it does in February. Limoenhoef suggests the fix happens well before the planting plan gets drawn.

Vondelpark:
Managed wildness, and where it gets complicated

Vondelpark gave us the most complicated picture, and I think the most honest one. Areas like the Koeienweide and Schapenweide are managed as genuinely wild, nutrient-poor meadow, mown, raked and deliberately kept low-fertility by volunteers working alongside a council ecologist, with the aim of building native biodiversity year on year. Elsewhere, newer naturalistic plantings along the Zochervijver and the banks of the Grote Speelweide use thousands of native, nectar-rich plants installed by local volunteers, along with willow-protected pockets of aquatic planting.

But there's also real tension in running "ecological" and "ornamental" management side by side in one historic park. Newer, more curated perennial and grass plantings have gone in around monuments and paths since around 2018, designed by the park's own gardening team, a shift towards more colour and a tidier kind of seasonal interest. Talking to people involved with the volunteer groups, it's clear this isn't all settled. There's ongoing debate about how much scrub and rose thicket should be left for insects and birds versus cut back to keep things looking cared for, and decisions made in one part of the park don't always sit comfortably with the ecological aims in another.

That's probably the most honest lesson we came home with. Naturalistic planting in a busy public park isn't a style you install once and then admire. It's an ongoing negotiation between ecology, maintenance budgets, volunteer goodwill and public expectation, and even the Dutch, with decades more practice than us, are still working out where that balance should sit.

What can we take away

A few things ran through all three sites that feel directly useful for our own work, and worth setting out properly rather than as a vague impression.

The first is that site ecology should set the planting logic, not just inform it at the margins. At Duinvallei, the masterplan used the existing dune topography, its variation in moisture, exposure and soil depth, as the actual structuring device for the layout, rather than treating it as a constraint to be engineered around and then dressed with “naturalistic” planting afterwards. On our own schemes, that would mean bringing ecological and hydrological survey work into masterplanning conversations earlier than we typically do, rather than receiving a fixed layout and being asked to plant it naturalistically after the fact.

The second is that resident involvement changes what planting is allowed to look like. Limoenhoef’s garden was designed through a structured permaculture process with future residents over roughly a year, covering path layout, planting zones and tree positions, before construction began, and it’s maintained by residents rather than a contractor. That process is the reason a scheme this informal, fruit trees and brambles mixed through native bank planting, works without complaint. For us, that points to building in early, structured resident workshops on appropriate projects (not just consultation on a finished layout), and being honest with clients and residents about what a naturalistic scheme will look like in the dormant season, before it goes in the ground rather than after.

The third is that naturalistic and ecological planting need a maintenance regime designed alongside them, with a named party responsible for it, not a general assumption that “low maintenance” planting looks after itself. Vondelpark’s meadows are actively managed, hay-cutting, raking off arisings to keep fertility low, willow coppicing, by volunteers working to a plan set with a council ecologist. Where that resourcing and clarity break down (as with the debate over how much scrub and rose thicket to leave for wildlife versus cut back), the ecological aims start to conflict with the visual ones. On our schemes, that means specifying a maintenance regime alongside the planting plan, not as an afterthought for the client or landscape contractor to work out later, and being specific about who cuts what, and when, and why.

The three principles underneath it, ecology-led layout, early and structured client or resident involvement, and maintenance planned as part of the design rather than bolted on afterwards, translate directly to our own projects, and are worth building into how we brief and deliver naturalistic planting from here on.



Eleanor + Donald
Landscape Architects Ltd

Chantry Yard, 33b King Street, Canterbury, CT1 2AJ

01227 490485

edla.co.uk

11 Burdford Road, London E15 2ST

office@edla.co.uk

@edla-landscape architects

@edlalandscape