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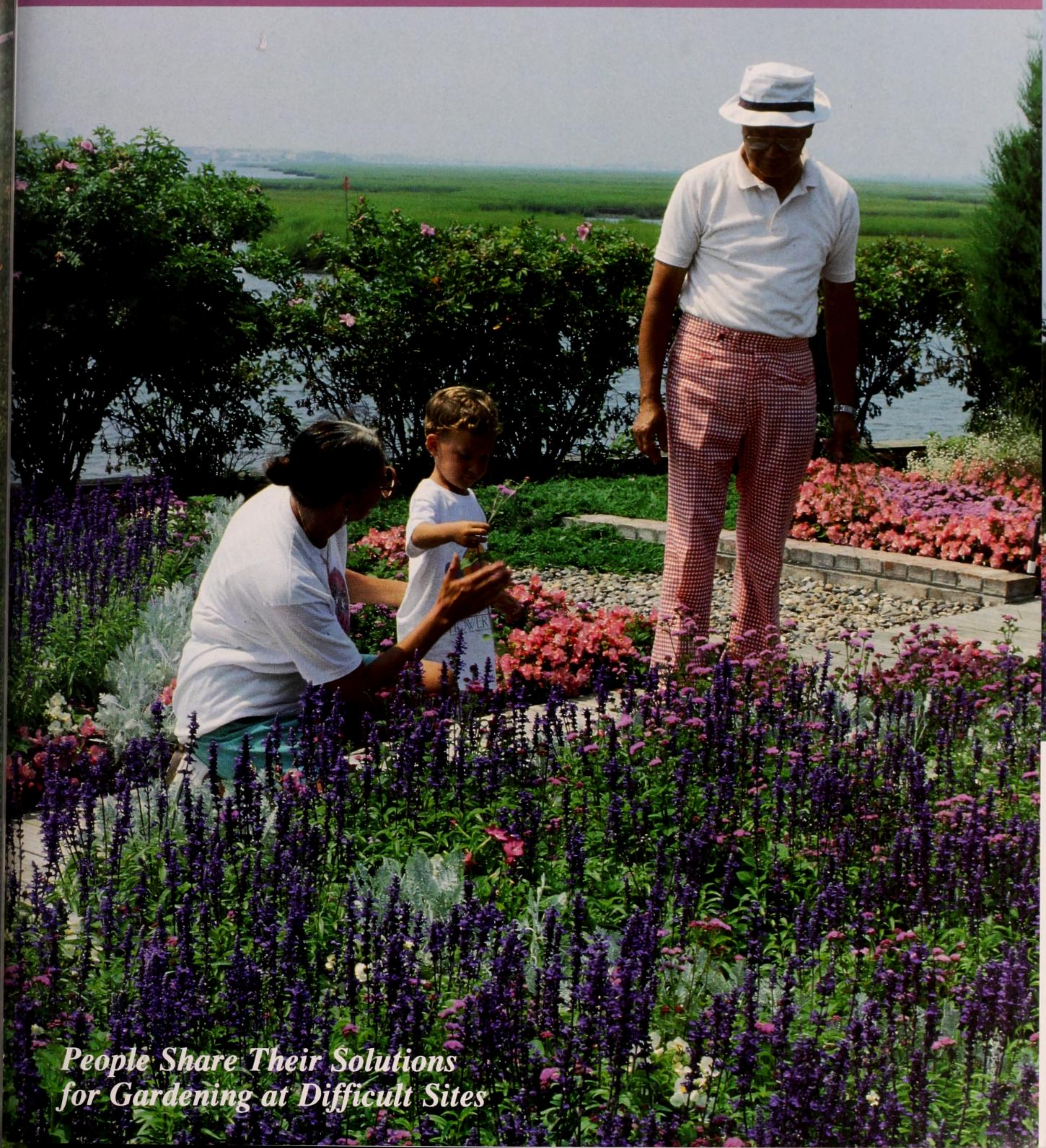
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THE PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY'S  
**GREEN SCENE**

JULY/AUGUST 1993 • \$2.00



*People Share Their Solutions  
for Gardening at Difficult Sites*



Southeast corner of 26th & Penrose Avenue. The challenge: transform this visual nightmare into a landscaped Gateway.



# Public Landscapes: *Who Cares; Who's Responsible?*

 by William Guthrie Hengst

*Philadelphia Gateways create our visitor's first impressions and reinforce daily travelers' impressions on those same roads. They're the difference between people wanting to come again, wanting to stay or wanting to get away as soon as possible.*

*Here's how a group of people and organizations saw one of the problems and cooperated to transform the messy Philadelphia Gateway landscape along 26th Street, on the route to and from Philadelphia's International Airport.*

Blaine Bonham, Jr., Executive Director

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green Program

Against a backdrop of oil refineries, tank farms and a mammoth car-crushing machine, motorists traveling between Philadelphia's International Airport and Center City along the one-mile stretch of 26th Street were assaulted by a clutter of billboards, abandoned automobiles and trash. A quick glimpse of this roadside mess at 50 miles an hour left a lasting impression: *Gritty City*. Hardly a gateway Philadelphians were proud of, and yet the mess persisted, defying solutions for decades until the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green Program took it on.

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

(PHS) created the 26th Street Gateway Project with a grant from Atlantic Financial (before it closed) as an opportunity to demonstrate that all of us have a responsibility for public landscapes. The Society began by building a coalition of people with a stake in the 26th Street corridor: City and State agencies, land owners and managers, airline and travel-related corporations, and community gardeners. Says Barbara Olejnik, manager, Public Landscapes for PHS's Philadelphia Green Program: "This project wouldn't have happened if we hadn't brought people together and stirred them with the possibilities for making a difference. We offered a sense of

ownership in the project by forming plant/people partnerships." (See box for list of partners.)

The vision for the 26th Street Gateway Project design came from Andropogon Associates, a nationally known ecological planning and design firm hired by Philadelphia Green as consultants for its experience in landscape management and restoration.

The designers started by getting to know the site, and studying how it worked ecologically. The 26th Street corridor consisted of leftover sections of what was once a tidal marsh, part of Tinicum Marsh, later filled for industrial and transportation uses. These

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land uses and ownership patterns shaped the site's visual character into five distinct landscape areas (See drawing).

"When we first looked at the place," says Carol Franklin, partner at Andropogon, "we had a hard time seeing its potential as a landscape because all that's visible are the symptoms of neglect and abuse. What at first seemed impossible, on closer inspection offered many possibilities for creating an attractive gateway into Philadelphia. After we peeled away the dirt, grime, and the billboards we could see the site contained fragments of a rich, urban meadow and old field vegetation on the west side, and stands of diverse plant species to the east on top of the railroad slope."

Says Franklin, "We conceived the project as a linear sequence of spaces in which the edges must be exploited because they're what the motorist mostly sees. Our idea was to create an urban parkway landscape that would link the five areas." Given the site's complexity and funding limitations, the project was implemented in phases.

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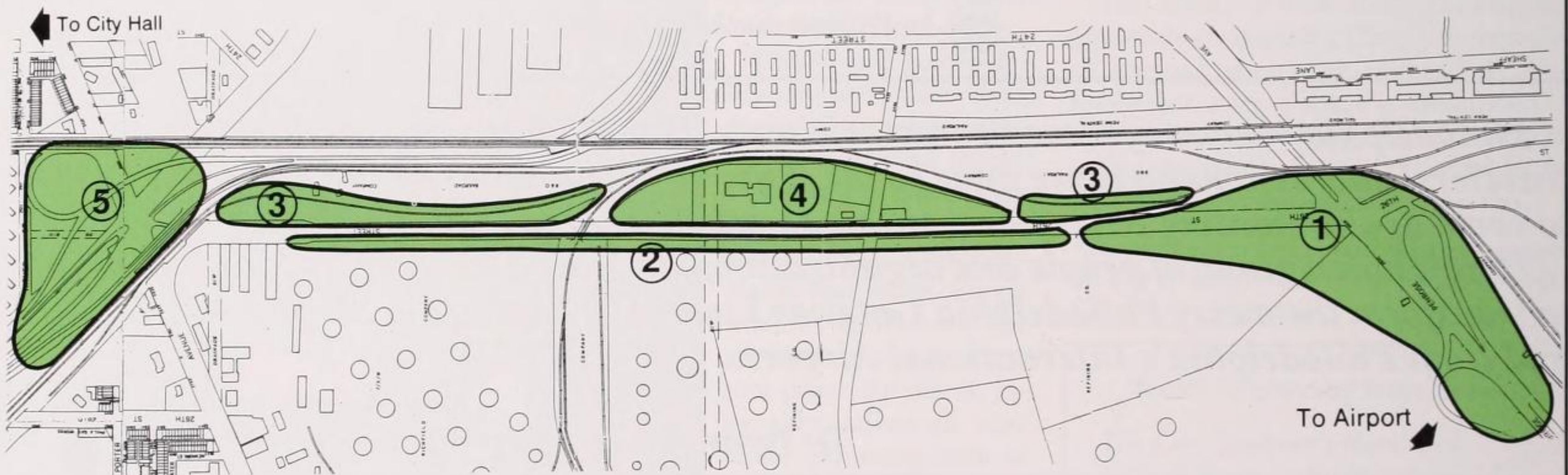
### The 26th Street Gateway Partners

Andropogon Associates/Designers  
 Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

#### Site Participants:

Chevron  
 Consolidated Rail Corporation  
 Pennsylvania Department of Transportation  
 Philadelphia Department of Streets  
 Philadelphia Electric Company  
 Sun Company, Inc.

In addition to contributions from these participants, a number of other organizations and individuals contributed to get the project started and to keep it going.



### The Five Major Landscape Areas of the 26th Street Gateway Corridor

The one-mile straight stretch of 26th Street is a distinct link in the airport-to-center-city drive.

- 1 26th Street & Penrose Avenue intersection, "Penrose Meadows"
- 2 Sun Company Refinery Edge
- 3 Railroad Embankments of Conrail and CSX
- 4 Private Lands (Steen Outdoor Advertising, Mary Pruitt Estate)
- 5 26th Street and the Schuylkill Expressway Interchange





### *The intersection of 26th Street & Penrose Avenue*

**Before:** The corner, chosen first to create an immediate visual impact and show the partnership what could be done, contained an abandoned, paved parking lot owned by PennDOT. The practically impervious soils were comprised of deep, heavy clays, mixed with construction rubble in the upper layer, and almost no organic layer. The corner cried out for something spectacular.



**After:** After PennDOT removed the pavement, subsoil was amended with a mixture of "Earth Life," a recycled byproduct donated by the City Water Department from its sewage treatment facility. The soil then was shaped and mounded into berms, which were planted with flowering crabapples, viburnums and red cedars. The edge between the roadway and berm was highlighted

with ornamental grasses and a ribbon of golden wildflowers. The carefully selected grasses, though not native, excluded invasives. A similar planting scheme was recently installed on the remaining three corners. It was funded by our partners the City of Philadelphia's Streets Department and PennDot.

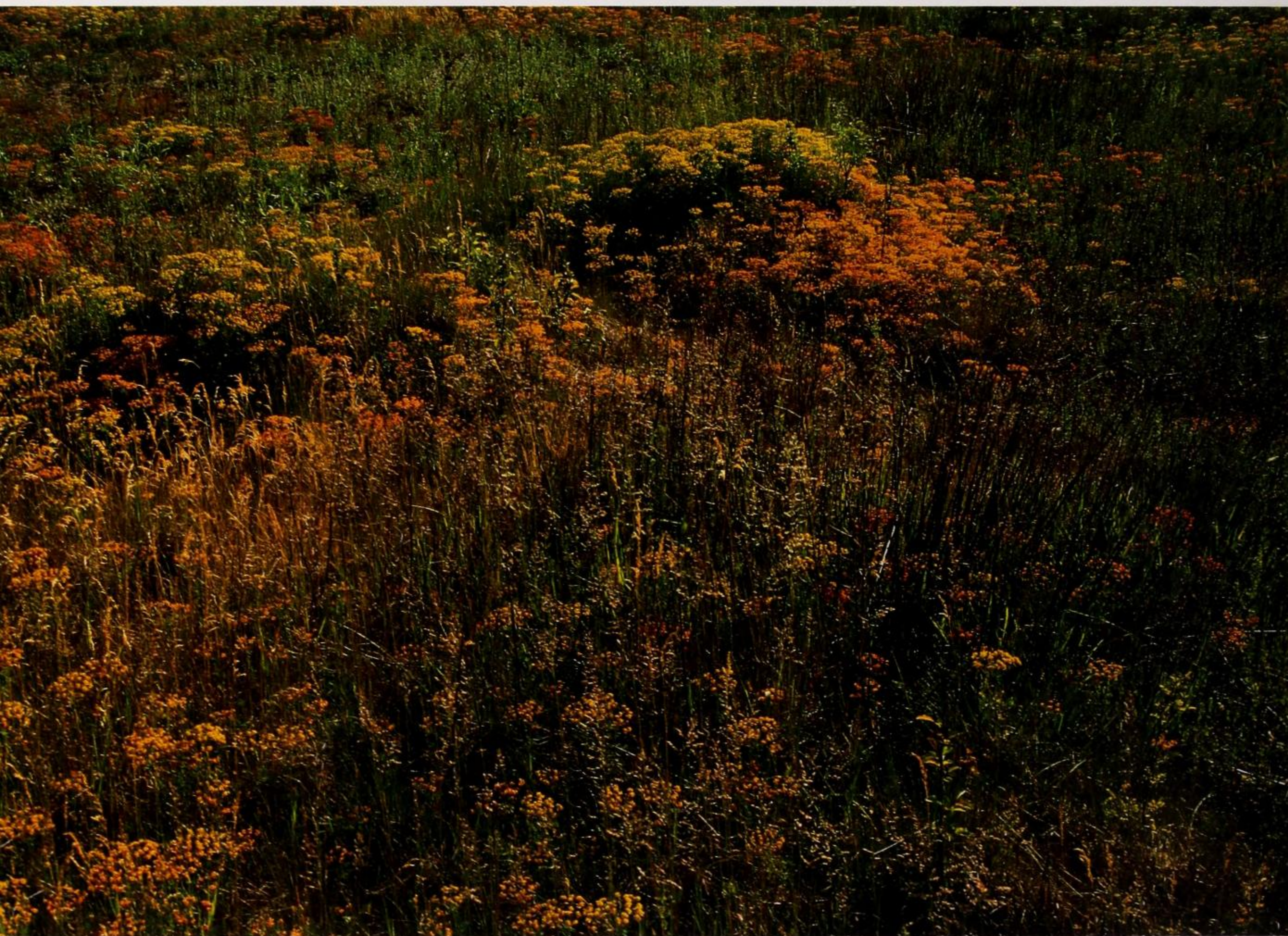
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## *Penrose meadow*

**Before:** An untended urban meadow lay behind the corner. Although scraggly and weedy, it contained many handsome native species, including milkweed, goldenrod, and asters. In urban settings with very local differences in soil structure and hydrology, meadow rejuvenation requires a process of trial and error over several years to learn the dynamics of the specific site and establish a sustainable and attractive meadow system.

photos by Andropogon Associates



**After:** The invasive vines and herbaceous plants were removed by hand and with selectively applied herbicides, keeping disturbance of existing native plants and soils to a minimum. More than half of the rejuvenated meadow's native grasses already grew on-site. Because the organic layer was too shallow to

replant the meadow with grass plugs, the grasses and wildflowers were increased by overseeding the meadow with a wildflower mix that included a cover crop of sheep fescue and 15 annual and perennial wildflower species. The results: stunning.





### *The refinery edge*

**Before:** How to transform the long, desolate and deteriorated paved edge that enclosed the Sun Company's tank farm along the west side of 26th Street became the 26th Street Gateway Project's biggest challenge. An ugly ribbon of asphalt and chain-link fence rimmed the 3/4-mile refinery edge, an easy place to dump abandoned vehicles and trash because there were no curbs or guard rails. Here some of the partners intervened and paved the way for horticultural solutions.

Coincident with the project, the Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO) had plans to dig a trench along the road's edge to lay some of its lines underground. PECO agreed to backfill the trench to meet the project's soil specifications for a planting bed. Then we installed new curbing, guard rail, and sidewalk.



**After:** With funding from Sun Company for this phase of the project, a series of 10-foot-high triangular, chain-link, steel trellises were installed along the perimeter of the fence and planted with two kinds of native vines: woodbine and trumpet vine. The trellises serve several purposes: they support the vines, heightening their visibility, and they stabilize the old fence. The trellises and vines softly frame yet keep Sun Company's tank farm's sculpture-like forms visible to motorists.

Further planting of the edge included red cedar

evergreens which, combined with the trellises, interrupt the monotony and syncopate the roadside rhythm. A variety of trumpet vine with orange flowers and a diversity of orange and yellow wildflowers and grasses were planted to extend the ribbon-of-gold. The variation in textural contrasts along the eastern edge increases the sense of depth, enriching the visual experience. Implemented in two stages, the entire stretch of fence line should blaze with blooms by late summer 1993.

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## Ongoing maintenance/management

What reading, writing, and arithmetic are to education, weeding, mulching, mowing, pruning, fertilizing and watering are to horticulture. The basics. Corporate sponsors, particularly Sun Company and Conrail, have generously funded an ongoing Gateway maintenance program that enables Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to retain and work with maintenance/management contractors.

Fortunately, *Andropogon's* design requires relatively low maintenance because it relies heavily on native plants, which require less fertilizer and irrigation than typical ornamental plantings. Less trash accumulates along 26th Street today because the landscape looks cared for. Maintenance here requires, what Carol Franklin calls, "succession managers rather than turf mowers."

Maintenance/management, the name-of-the-game along the eastern edge, moved into high gear this year with contributions from Conrail. After eliminating half the billboards, masses of invasive vines and plants were removed. The slopes of the railroad embankment will be stabilized and enhanced with hedgerow plantings of red maple and sweetgum, similar to those already established on the western side. Native grasses and perennials will be planted along the edge to tie the scheme together with the ribbon-of-gold theme.

photo by Barbara Olejnik

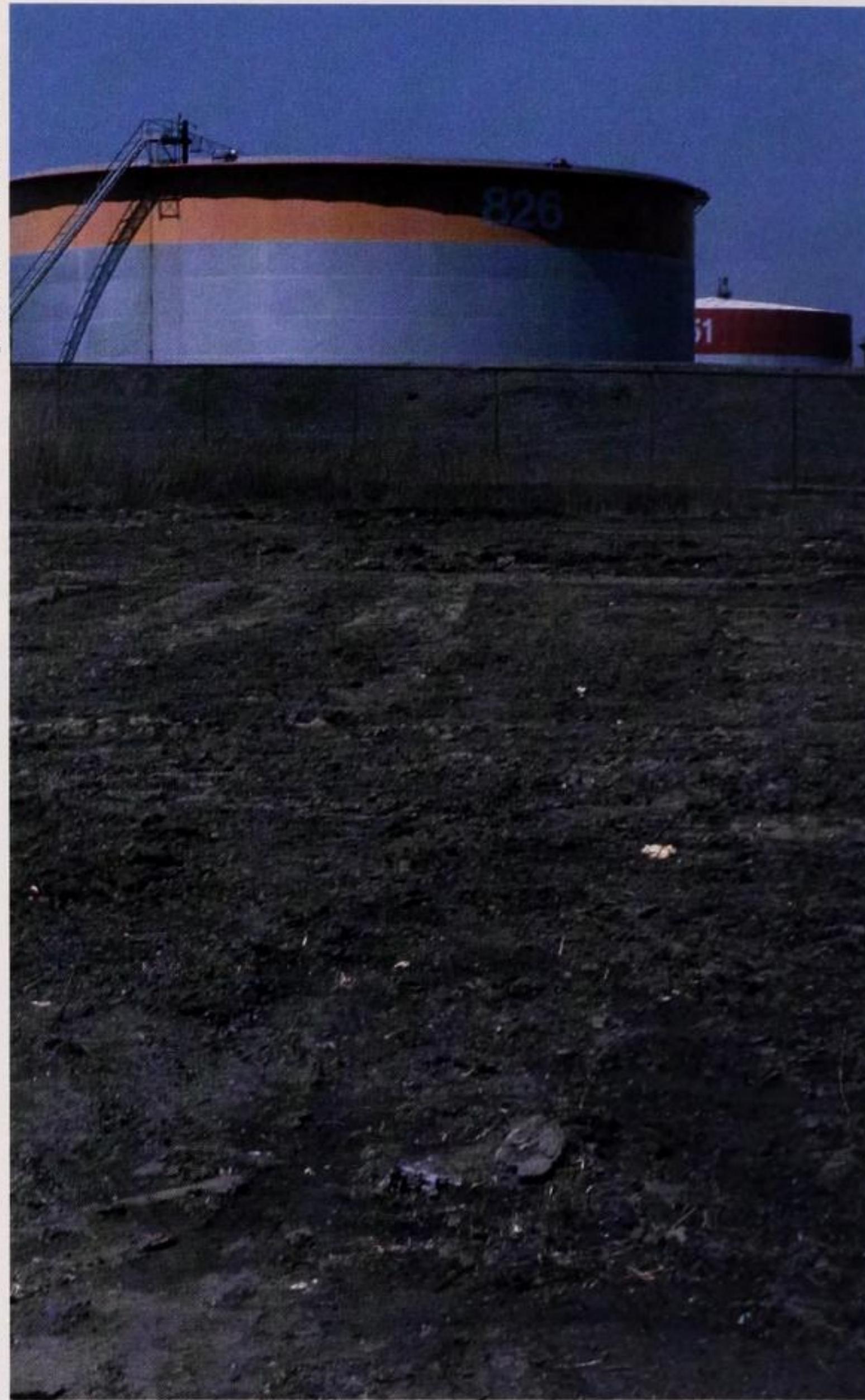


photo by Andropogon Assoc.

## What we learned

With three of the five landscape areas successfully launched, the 26th Street Gateway Project has borne fruit of several varieties (listed below): There is even evidence that the rejuvenated landscape attracts more wildlife. Barbara Olejnik reports hearing lots of songbirds and seeing pheasants and butterflies, including Monarchs, none of which were sighted here before the project. In addition to the tangible transformation of this once messy roadside into a seasonally stunning parkway, these lessons stand out:

- **Plant/people partnerships really work.** Put together the right mix of people and expertise — public stakeholders, private land owners and managers, landscape horticulture professionals, and volunteers — and you create a synergistic effect. As Olejnik puts it: "Nobody can do it alone. What at first seemed like an over-

whelming project that no one wanted to tackle, became doable as we worked together."

- **Break the project into stages and go for immediate results.** The entire 26th Street corridor was too much to tackle all at once. Only after the landscaped corner site was complete and visible to the potential partners did commitments become real.

- **Re-evaluate periodically.** Once you put a design like this into the ground, you need to go back over several seasons to see if your original ideas are holding up and doing what you thought they would do. It is not a definitive process, rather an ongoing learning experience for PHS, the designers, the partners, and the maintenance contractors. Ongoing maintenance support with long-term commitments to landscape management are necessary for success.

- **Educate the eye.** Appreciation for the kinds of landscapes that surround urban

industrial sites requires careful looking to understand them. According to Barbara Olejnik, "People are used to seeing mowed lawns and ornamental shrubs instead of wonderful, wild scraggly things. What we've got here is a looser, more naturalistic landscape. The eye needs retraining to appreciate diversity in the landscape." PHS holds periodic tours for its partners, giving them the opportunity to walk the site together, learn first-hand what grows here, how to recognize and care for it. And finally, to cherish it.

●

William G. Hengst, free-lance writer and land planner, resides in West Mt. Airy, Philadelphia. His interest in the landscape began during boyhood in the 1940s when lawn mowing and eradicating crabgrass were the rage. Today, in his spare time, he assists as a horticulture volunteer at the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania.

photo by Barbara Olejnik



◀ Before: Section between corner and refinery edge.

After: Spring in bloom. ▼



photo by Andropogon Associate



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photo by Barbara Olejnik

Same site in fall. At first some people were surprised by the wilder, more scraggly landscape. They thought that the softer, browner colors meant the ornamental grasses were dying. Used to suburban gardens, they came to understand the requirements of urban industrial sites where these plantings replaced mowed lawns and ornamental shrubs.

*the green scene / july 1993*