D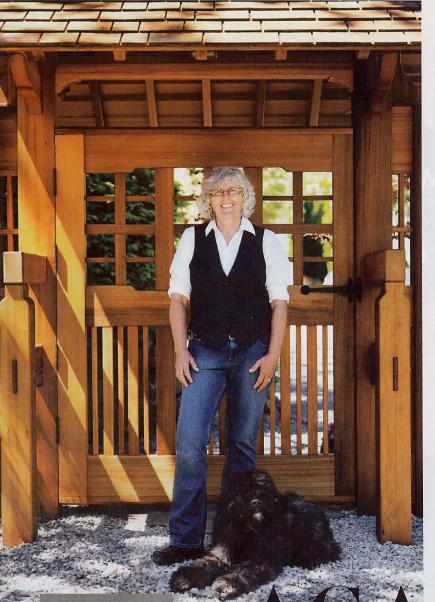ieuwertje von Aesch (Dita for short) is rhapsodizing about western red cedar, the chief material in the passageways and gates that secured her the landscape architecture award. She's talking about the wood's natural rot-resistant properties and its life-enhancing oils and its suitability to this climate. About its versatility. About its beauty. "Absolutely gorgeous," she enthuses. "Western red cedar is the nicest stuff out there, and we've got the best in the world right here on the Island." Von Aesch, born in the Netherlands, started her two-person firm in the basement of her Victoria home in 2006, and since then her projects—stately wooden pergolas, gates and pathways—have won her acclaim and a steady clientele around Victoria and the Gulf Islands.

What the clients appreciate, von Aesch says, is the chance to let the environment, the garden and the house commune, an interactivity that begins with that beloved red cedar. (She allows that she will use yellow cedar for wedges and muscular oak for pegs in her traditional joinery.) In her devotion to local materials and her fierce support for her supplier (Sooke's Mike Warburton), little has changed since her days as a chef in Vancouver restaurants like Bridges and Delilah's. Her cooking days are over (last job: the Empress Hotel), but her love of sharp objects remains; her innocent-looking home shelters a basement shop complete with table saw, bandsaw, flat mortiser, hollow chisel mortiser, router, planer and jointer. From them, over two to three months, emerge hardscape pieces that wowed the judges for their "artistic approach" (Ron Rule), their "technical proficiency" (Jim Hole) and their "phenomenal attention to detail" (Ted McLachlan).

Designer Dieuwertje von Aesch and pal Joop in front of one of her red cedar passageways, for a private residence in Victoria's Oak Bay.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

Dita von Aesch finds inspiration in local woods and traditional techniques for her artful cedar passageways. BY JOHN BURNS