

# Planting a Library

## An Interview with Elisabeth C. Miller

By Michael Lynn

Pendleton and Elisabeth Miller had a vision and, as a result, Seattle has one of the finest public horticultural libraries in the country. Betty Miller, who together with her late husband has been the driving force behind the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, graciously agreed to be interviewed.

I know the Elisabeth C. Miller Library is conveniently located at the Center for Urban Horticulture on the University of Washington campus. I know exceptionally knowledgeable staffpersons always stand ready to help locate answers to any and all horticultural questions. I know that I can also look to over 7,200 books and 240 subscriptions for these answers. But being curious, I want to know the important human interest story behind this great library.



Elisabeth C. Miller

Photograph by Noreen Frank

Betty, after your successful involvement with the development of the Center for Urban Horticulture, why did you and Mr. Miller immediately embark on the task of establishing a horticultural library?

**ECM** The library was really Pen's idea. He was the library person. Pen believed that a library was essential to support the fields of law, history, medicine, and science. Yes, and even gardening.

So, was the original intent of the library to serve the Center for Urban Horticulture?

**ECM** Only incidentally. Primarily it was to serve the general public. The original intent was to establish a library with the finest available books and periodicals "in the gardener's language" in which answers to the interminable questions about each and every plant could be found. The Miller Library from its inception was to serve the public, gardeners and children, and at the same time be a resource for landscape designers, architects, professional horticulturists, students, and faculty. Let me stress we are not a plant science library, although some elementary plant science information is available. The University of Washington has an outstanding academic library for all plant sciences.

You don't need to know plant science to be a gardener - you best learn about gardening from hands-on experience. You do need to know such practical information as what your soil is...our natural soil is not the greatest. It's acid and very sandy. Sand is very good for drainage, but not fine sand. And our native sand is very fine. If the soil gets very dry, you can pour gallons of water on top of it without absorption occurring and further it will not drain. So how do you cope with this? You find the answer in the Miller Library. I wish I could get

across to our gardeners that all needed, useful information is in the library. When to transplant, how to prune, when and how to plant...everything can be found in the library.

How did you develop your superb garden without access to a horticultural library?

**ECM** I learned the hard way - hit or miss, and from fellow plantsmen. Moreover, years ago, whenever we tried to grow something that was difficult to grow in cultivation, we tried to get three plants and plant them at three different locations. We would learn from that experience how they reacted to the differences, i.e., a plant that grows in full sun at a high altitude could need partial shade at sea level. If the library had been available, it could have provided us with this advice. There are very few horticultural libraries in the country, and very few of these are open to the public. The Elisabeth C. Miller Library is recognized as one of the finest horticultural libraries in the United States, and Northwest gardeners have easy access. There is even a lending library.

Betty, with one of the finest horticultural libraries at your disposal, what are your favorite books?

**ECM** Some of my favorites you have to credit to my age. I love the books by the early English landscapers and gardeners, Russell Page's *The Education of a Gardener*, *The Opinionated Gardener* by Geoffrey Charlesworth, *The Plants of the Bible*, and last but not least, *The Secret Garden*, which I read as a child.

Speaking of children...

**ECM** Oh yes, I am particularly proud of our children's collection of books. Some are available through the lending library. This is an area which I am very interested in expanding.

Tell me something about the rare book library.

**ECM** The rare books cover quite a range of interest, with a focus upon art. For example, Paul Mellon's recently published book of art work from the 14th century for the Roxbury Club in England, *Two East Anglian Picture Books: A Facsimile of the Helmingham Herbal and Bestiary and Bodleian Ms. Ashmole, 1504*. The designs—artist unknown, purpose unknown—are beautiful and more contemporary than our current contemporary art. I personally am partial to the early 17th century herbal books which give the medicinal use of plants. Today, pharmaceutical firms are researching the same plants. You can take almost any name on your medicine bottle and, from that name, you can track it back to the plant it came from.

At this point, Betty asked me to get from the shelf her most treasured book, Gerarde's *Herball*, published in 1636. The burnished leather cover holds fragile yellowed pages of delicate line drawings of the most popular medicinal herbs of the day, their uses and value. Betty entertained me with the old English text describing amusing uses for the plants. For example: "Glycyrrhiza vulgaris: Common Licorice. The vertues. The root of licorice is good againft the rough harfhneffe of the throat and breft; it openeth the pipes of the lungs when they be stuffed or stopped and ripeneth the cough."

Then we looked for a plant common to us today and found the following about the columbine:

"...vertues of columbines...not yet fufficiently known; for they ar vfed epecially to decke the gardens of the curious...a dram weight of the feed (columbines), with halfe a feruple or ten graines of Saffron giuen in wine, is a good and effectuall medicine for the stopping of the liuer, and the yellow jaundife, but faith he, that who fo hath taken it muft be well couered with clothes, and then fweat."

We also found that even in the 16th century strawberries in champagne were festive and helped one's disposition: "Fragaria - Red Straw-berries...The diftilled water drunke with white Wine is good againft the paffion of the heart, reuiuing the fpirits, and making the heart merry."

As you look at the Miller Library today, does it fulfill your original vision?

**ECM** Very much so. It was intended for the use of our gardeners, up and down the street, all of our gardeners, because it uses the gardener's language. It is even very popular with faculty so we have decided they like this language also. The books are great for people who are landscaping, but the periodicals are invaluable from the standpoint of keeping up-to-date with new developments. With the children's collection, we reach all ages and all levels of gardening interest.

What is the story I recall hearing about naming the library after you?

**ECM** Well, when I was asked about the name I responded that it should be named after Pen. Apparently they asked Pen the same question. When I saw my name being used, I inquired. The explanation: it had been decided to favor Pen's wishes since he was the source of the funding.

What do you envision for the library in the future?

**ECM** I am looking forward to another expansion. We must keep expanding our book and periodical collection to keep astride of the growing interest in horticulture...there is no end to it. We need future funding to continue to maintain the high standards of the library. We need to continue to add duplicate books for lending, which can be checked out by the public for three weeks. Also, I would very much like to see the library open Saturdays and additional evening hours. Grants from NHS have provided the funding for Monday night hours for the past two years. Oh yes...we also need to expand our computer capability. Expansion of computers will make the library accessible to more people.

Betty, if you had one wish for the library, what would it be?

**ECM** For people to discover and use it!

At the conclusion of our meeting Betty showed me a small statue of the Patron Saint of Gardeners, Saint Piacre, who held a shovel in one hand and a book in the other. Somehow, although the statue was lovely, it was an anticlimax. I felt I had spent the evening with Seattle's patron of gardeners - Elisabeth C. Miller.

Michael Lynn is past president of NHS.

The Miller Library is a wonderful paradox, offering, on the one hand, a tranquil temple to gardening and horticulture, and, on the other, an exciting staccato of diversions and distractions. To the Miller Library I offer a huge bouquet!

Ellen Morrison, volunteer in the Miller Library

When I discovered the Library, I found a gardener's resource that is a great asset for the Northwest; more people should discover it. The lending library is the feature I use most.

Marilyn Cottingham, Seattle gardener and active Master Gardener

Sharing information about plants is my livelihood, my love, and is the feature of my existence most valued by my community. So, like hummingbirds prize flowers rich in nectar, do I prize the library.

Arthur Lee Jacobson, Northwest writer whose most recent book is *Purpleleaf Plums*, Timber Press

The Elisabeth Miller Library's steadily increasing holdings include not only important books from all over the world, but local records and regional information found nowhere else. Equally valuable are the nursery catalog collections, both current publications popular with gardeners and heritage volumes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Ann Lovejoy, garden columnist for the Seattle Post Intelligencer, contributor to many magazines, and author of *The American Mixed Border*, Macmillan

Without a doubt the Elisabeth C. Miller Library is one of the truly great resources in Seattle. It houses an extraordinary collection of works for horticulturists, bibliophiles, students ranging from preschoolers to holders of advanced degrees, and people like me who simply love gardening books and gardening.

Phoebe Andrew, avid Seattle gardener