Betty Miller's Soundside Medley

This four-acre garden up the hill from Puget Sound is so crammed with unusual plants that even the experts are hard-pressed to name them all.

By Richard A. Howard

Betty Miller's garden is a challenge. It was a challenge to its owner to grow so many woody ornamental plants on only four acres. It is a challenge to the visitor to find them all, and a challenge to horticulturists to identify the exotics she has assembled: several thousand taxa representing probably the most diverse collection in a private garden of comparable area.

As visitors approach the garden on a narrow thoroughfare, they are surrounded by the dominant vegetation of the Pacific Northwest: tall stately redwoods, Douglas firs, broadleaf maples, western hemlocks, and cedars tower above the roadway. The colorful trunks of the madrone (Arbutus menziesii) and the plumes of rock spirea (Holodiscus discolor) limit the view of Puget Sound to glimpses.

The property descends in stages over 200 feet, with the English country stone-and-cedar house on an upper level. The entrance drive descends to a small parking area defined with naturally aged granite rocks that have become covered with lichens and mosses. Here are evergreens of varying shapes and textures and a variety of maples that contrast in foliage and, in the fall, display brilliant color. Toward the house a narrow bed, the rockery, hints at the wealth of plant material throughout the property. The only manicured areas are a strict narrow strip of grass in front of foundation plantings on the east side of the house and one slightly larger in a sweeping free form to its west. All rooms open to the western terraces that overlook this small lawn to Puget Sound, with its ever-changing traffic and the never-changing profile of the Olympic Mountains. At no time is one particularly aware of the house. It seems to be snuggled among trees and shrubs.

Betty Miller and her late husband, Pendleton Miller, acquired the property in 1949. She was a sportsperson; a garden was something new. She filled expanses of prepared beds with white petunias, and after two seasons of picking rain-splashed spent flowers, abandoned the petunias forever. Two mature 'Gumpo' azaleas were proudly planted to flank the front door. In flower they stood out like a pair of squatting white ducks.

A German-educated landscape designer, John W. Fischer, had seen the horticultural potential of this property's mix of open space and woods, damp areas and dry. At this point, he advised that one's eye should pass pleasingly over a continuity of harmonious plantings. Suddenly, Miller could...
envision creating an overall sculpture with plants as the medium. She began seeking plants with interesting form, bark, foliage, different shades of green, and flowers. At first she obtained unusual plants from friends and local nurseries; then she began to search catalogs, and later, to help sponsor expeditions to obtain materials she liked. Eventually, Miller would help found the Rare Plant Group of the Garden Club of America, a small group of women dedicated to sharing the best of plant material.

These new plants usually lacked cultural instructions. It was a challenge to find the right place and conditions for them; each one was a learning experience. To better protect them, she decided to underplant in the wooded area and develop circuitous paths through it. Today, few plants in her garden are isolated enough to be photographed in outline. Certainly they do not grow that way in nature, and Miller concluded that plants want company, or perhaps competition, because the right associates obviously thrive and usually seem to do better when slightly stressed. She has found that she can intermingle plants, enjoy some surprises, and learn from her mistakes.

Thus, unusual combinations abound: a loquat (Eriobotrya japonica) near the base of a Chinese fir (Cunninghamia lanceolata) shows intriguing contrasts of leaf and branch; the young bronze foliage of a golden-rain tree (Koelreuteria paniculata) serves as a foil to a blue-flowered clematis (Clematis macropetala); in the fall, the brilliant gold of a bittersweet (Celastrus scandens) scrambles through the dark green of a Douglas fir.

A group must pass single file through most of Miller's garden. It is not the place for a crowd. Some of the paths are defined by discs of cedar wrapped with a treated fish net to improve traction. This requires the visitor to walk head down for safe footing and to avoid careless damage to plants, and—guess what?—the visitor sees more!

The wooded area is truly a layered garden. Native trees form the uppermost layers. Below are such ornamentals as Euptelea polyandra, Enkianthus chinensis, Symplocos coreana, Decaisnea fargesii, Triptelaeia paniculata, Rhododendron macabeanum, R. desquamatum 'Finch', and R. fictolacteum. Under this layer is a seasonal spring fantasy of intermingled species of Trillium, Roscoea, Arisaema, and species of trailing arbutus (Epigaea repens and E. asiatica) are hidden under branches of evergreen shrubs such as the native salal (Gaultheria shallon). Sheets of twinflower (Limaea borealis) highlight the forest floor. Also to be found here are the Asiatic goldthread (Coptis quinquefolia), a type of Jack-in-the-pulpit (Arisaema nikoense), and meadow rue (Thalictrum kiusianum), near the American box huckleberry (Gaylussacia brachycera) and wild ginger (Asarum shuttleworthii). All remind the visitor of the similarity of plants of eastern Asia and eastern North America, often with twin species or genera debatably identical or taxonomically different.

As the wooded area opens to the west there is a collection of hemlock taxa intermingled with the wheel tree (Trocho-
**How Has Her Garden Grown?**

Betty Miller observes that it is difficult to teach others how planting is done. She maintains that it is basically a matter of common sense—not so much how, but what and where and when. An appreciation of art and a good sense of texture are important, for most plants can be admired in bloom for a relatively short period of time. Consider how they will look the rest of the year: the form and texture, the bark, the shade of green and its intensity, the stages of expansion and development. If your choice of plant or its location or care is not right, it soon becomes evident: the plant will tell you so. Then act promptly.

The Seattle area might seem to have an abundance of mist or rain or cloudy weather, but in Miller’s garden, where good drainage has been developed, watering is a major concern. With such closely planted treasures, moving a length of hose is a careful operation. Sprinkler systems won’t do, for the requirements of plants vary. Spring foliage under sprinklers often becomes soft and more succulent to insects. Miller uses soaker heads placed close to the ground. “Soak the area,” is the instruction given, “don’t just wet the ground.”

Miller has found that it’s important for air to move through the plantings, enough so that the branches themselves move. Stagnant air pockets slow the plant’s growth and create a haven for fungi and insect masses. It is often necessary to remove branches or thin the higher vegetation to get healthy circulation. Spraying a fungicide or insecticide is an action of last resort. If this is not successful, the plant is burned in order to prevent the spread of disease. This has happened only half a dozen times in nearly fifty years.

The garden abounds with wildlife, which some gardeners would consider pests. Rodents do pull out labels, yet they create drainage holes with their tunnels. Miller sometimes competes with the birds and rodents for mature fruits and seeds. “Plant enough for both of you,” is her suggestion. Chipmunks and some birds plant many of the seeds they harvest, and certain seeds need to pass through a digestive system in order to germinate. Several of Miller’s prize specimen plants are from these sources. The snakes and lizards are helpful; the raucous jays remove caterpillars, presumably to feed their young; lady bugs control aphids.

How does she keep track of all her plants? Initially a tan-colored metal label was hinged on a stout wire so it could be lifted or lowered to protect the writing on the underside. That label carried the names of as many as six plants in the immediate vicinity. At times only Miller knew which was which. Next she tried a plastic label pre-bent to forty-five degrees from the vertical, fluted for strength, and pointed near the base. These have survived for twenty years but are fading. Most recently Miller has acquired three-eighths-inch strips of rigid aluminum used in making storm window frames. These can be cut to the desired length and sharpened for insertion. Once inscribed, they are dipped in an exterior acrylic emulsion paint, Rhoplex AC.235. The label can be pushed almost to ground level beside the plant and remain inconspicuous.

Form a mat that enriches the soil. Other ground covers produce a loose, friable soil that retains moisture and seems to aid air absorption. Outtanding in this regard are species of coral-bells (Heuchera). In large areas Vancouveria chrysanthem and V. planipetala ‘Prostrata’, with its very small, shiny foliage, are used along with Epimedium perralderanum and Rubus tricolor.

Miller has recently started a small marsh garden by lining a shallow excavation with plastic. A lazy-S walkway winds through small ornamental grasses, sedges, and lilies, including Imperata cylindrica var. rubra, Uncinia rubra, and Ophiopogon planiscapus ‘Nigrescens’. The handsome Blechnum tabulare serves as background. A prostrate Gunnera hamiltonii, an endangered plant in its native New Zealand, is thriving. The Asian skunk cabbage (Lysichiton camtschatcensis) with its opaque
white spathes, can be seen among plants of *Ledum glandulosum*, *Kalmia microphylla*, and *Phlebia magellonica*.

Miller's garden has developed in phases. The heath family first intrigued her; then her interest turned to ferns, then to gymnosperms and ground covers. She has no favorites now, but enthusiastically points out one gem after another. She has a story for each. Korean fir (*Abies koreana*) with its perpendicular cones is as much admired as the smallest conifer, mountain rimu (*Dacrydium laxifolium*). A group of club moss species (*Selaginella*) next catches her eye. She defies you to find the minute cones on a Jack pine fifteen years old but only two and a half feet high. An ash (*Sorbus poteriifolia*) ten years old and a mere four inches high produces pink flowers and white fruits. A green mat of the tiniest white and purple-veined violets (*Viola wederlundia var. yakuimana*) is everyone's spring favorite, yet no one to whom Miller has given plants can make them grow. Miller moves on to note the spectacular blue fruits of *Billardiera longiflora*, which derives its name from the long yellow petals. I suspect my favorite is either *Gauletia miceliana* with its white fruits or *Gauletia adenosothrix* with crimson fruits; or perhaps it is the *Stauntonia hexasphylla* covering the trellis on the patio, or maybe the *Vitis vinifera* 'Purpurea' transmitting such a lovely hue of sunlight! But every visitor to Miller's garden has his own.

All gardens have work areas and necessary buildings. Those in Miller's garden are inconspicuous. An area for plant propagation and the houses that serve as nurseries for young plants are hidden away in the plantings. Seeds are started in clay pots, which in turn are submerged to the lip in sand, soil, or mulches. During the summer, a flat house contains a collection of viorea rhododendrons. These, too, are in clay pots mulched deep in redwood bark but with the threat of a freeze, moved to closed houses where the temperature can be kept at 35°F by electric heaters while the air is circulated by small, low-speed fans.

The Seattle area suffered a disastrous freeze in the winter of 1988-89. There was great damage to plants in this neighborhood, even to the commonly planted cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*). The temperature fell to 10°F with a snow cover, but the real damage was done in the following three weeks by a great fluctuation in the temperature and dehydrating winds. Miller characteristically has held off severe pruning to see how the plants respond. When asked what she lost, she replies that she hasn't given up on any plant yet. Some obviously will require heavy pruning or replacement, while others will not only survive but recover much of their form. Her patience is apparently being rewarded, for Miller observes that never has the Indian pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*) been so abundant.

Looking to the future, Miller wants her garden continued and has chosen landscape architect and nurseryman Ken Gambrell as curator. The plant records of the garden, now on cards or in notebooks, are being placed in a database for easier accessibility. Recently the entire garden was surveyed, and Miller is mapping the location of each plant in her collection, with the help of horticulturists Mareen Krueckberg and Joseph Bishop. It is hoped that each one also will be documented by a herbarium specimen. The garden will be privately and perpetually endowed, maintained as it is at present, and open to visitors by advance appointment. A board of knowledgeable persons has been selected to guide the future of this remarkable collection.

Down in one corner of the orchard is a very large stand of clematis in a predominantly four-leafed form. Most visitors take a leaf in the hope that it can bring them the same good fortune with their gardening as Miller has had with hers.

Richard Howard is vice president for Botanical Science at the New York Botanical Garden. A visit to Betty Miller's garden is among the activities scheduled for the 1990 American Horticultural Society Annual Meeting.

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**A Lady of Myriad Achievements**

Miller served as an adviser to the Arbor Fund, then responsible for administering the Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island as a resource for the University of Washington. It is now an independent foundation and open to the public. She helped with the difficult transition of the University of Washington's Arboretum to Washington Park and the Center for Urban Horticulture. She was among the founders of the Rhododendron Species Foundation and the Ornamental Horticultural Society. She was awarded a gold medal from the International Botanical Congress for her role in their 1969 exhibit of Eriocaulaceae. At the national level Miller has been active in the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboretum, the American Horticultural Society, and the Garden Club of America. Her garden and civic contributions have earned her two gold medals from the Garden Club of America, including the Natalie Peters Webster Gold Medal; her awards from the American Horticultural Society include its highest, the prestigious Liberty Hyde Bailey Gold Medal Award, which she received in 1988.

*Far right: Billardiera longiflora has spectacular blue fruit, but its name comes from its long yellow blooms [see page 46].*