A GARDENER'S GARDEN

By David Laskin
Hidden away in an exclusive community in Seattle is one of the most celebrated and original gardens in the world. Here's an account of the estate garden of Betty Miller and why her dream for perpetuating it beyond her death may be in legal jeopardy.

"Estate garden" is not a term one ordinarily associates with the young, middle-class, suburban, freeway-girt city of Seattle. "Estate garden" conjures up venerable English pleasure grounds like Stourhead and Hidcote, or, on this side of the Pond, Henry Francis DuPont's Winterthur outside of Wilmington, Delaware or Dunbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. And yet, hidden away in the northern fringes of the city, there is indeed an estate garden of extraordinary delicacy and finesse, even eccentric originality.

The Garden of Elizabeth Carey ("Betty") Miller is small as estate gardens go — a mere four acres — but it fairly brims with botanical interest. These grounds bear the unmistakable stamp of genius and perfectionism: Here worked an individual of rigid backbone, penetrating vision, matchless taste, and indomitable persistence, and sufficient energies to make her every green wish a reality. Mrs. Miller, who died in March, 1994 at the age of 79, devoted nearly half a century to transforming her wedge of land, which had been sliced off by that much larger estate in the 1940s, from a sandy tangle of underbrush and scraggly growth, into a gorgeous, complex, scale of living things — truly a realm unto itself.

After death, she left the property as a charitable foundation, with a board of trustees, a skeleton staff, and a generous trust to keep her garden going — theoretically forever. She hoped the estate would become a kind of private center for horticultural research, education, and plant propagation and appreciation. She hoped, above all, that her garden would endure. Like a poet or a king, she intended to cheat mortality by creating a monument for the ages — green, crisp, vivid, and flourishing in her memory in perpetuity.

But now, just two years after Mrs. Miller's death, the garden's legal status is in limbo and its future unclear. More or less a secret outside the horticultural world, the garden opens its gates to the interested (and worthy) visitor by invitation only — which in practice means that one asks very politely to be admitted and if one is deemed sufficiently serious and respectful one is eventually granted a chartered tour. But even this is too much for some neighbors who resent any breach of their gated community.

Nobody wants to go on record, but everyone in Seattle's close-knit garden world is speculating and guessing like mad about what's going to happen with the Miller garden. A few months ago Daniel Zatz, who had worked on the grounds for years and whom Mrs. Miller appointed to direct the garden after her death, left to work on other gardens. A new director, Richard Hartlage, formerly superintendent of parks in Morris County, New Jersey, was duly installed this month. So far, the official word is "Nothing will change" under the new regime, but that seems impossible. The two sides — the garden and the community — are "pussylegging around a lawsuit," as one local landscape designer put it (anonymously, of course). There was talk a while back that the family who owns the spread next door wanted to buy the Miller estate and use it to put up overflow guests. Nothing came of that, but the idea that the property might be sold still hangs in the air.

Carey Miller, one of two Miller sons, says his mother's wish was that the garden would continue as a center for the dissemination of horticultural ideas, information, and plant material, but in a quiet, low-key way. The plant-sharing part of this wish is already happening through a limited way. By Daniel Hinkley's Heronswood Nursery. But is there is someone who ever sees Mrs. Miller's will. "The garden is operating just as it did during her lifetime," is the party line. But there is this crucial difference. During her lifetime the garden was essentially the yard of a private residence and those, who came to see it, were Mrs. Miller's guests; now it is part of a charitable foundation and the visitors belong to that amorphous entity known as "the public." If the community moves to keep the public out, what happens to the Miller garden's charitable foundation status? It's conceivable that in the face of sufficient community opposition, the trustees would have no recourse but to sell. Whether the issue can be resolved amicably and satisfactorily remains to be seen. A final ruling is probably still a long way off, but meanwhile, it's all very delicate and complicated and hush-hush.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have slipped in and wandered here while the garden remains intact as Mrs. Miller left it, only two years more gloriously established.

Every garden, every real garden, is a map of the dream life of its creator. That mass of color, this turn in the path, this shift of light make up the legend, the key to the gardener's shadowy intentions and deep yearnings. We study the arrangements of plants in landscape to understand another person's idea of goodness, for that's what gardens are about, aren't they? — beauty, innocence, peace, plenty. Why else put space to soil if not to conjure up ideal order? Here in the Miller Garden, even more than in most great gardens, the creative hovers near, almost oppressively close at hand. Mrs. Miller is the ghost in her garden.

From upper left, counter-clockwise: the Upper Woodland tapestry; an evergreen display, looking into the Upper Woodland's mingled layers from the entrance; a forest-floor pattern; an approach to the embowered house; the lower garden bog with a footbridge; and Mrs. Miller at a 1990 dedication ceremony for the horticultural library she endowed at UW.

Garden photos by David Stockdale
the guardian spirit kneeling just out of sight behind that Osmanda japonica fern, crowning at the still untended bank of salal over yonder, jabbing the careless visitor in the ribs if a shoe tip strays into a patch of cyclamen. There she stands at the window of her beloved library to survey her work in progress and add yet another column to her eternal list. To visit here is to commune with her shade. Many hands have planted and tended these grounds. Many landscape designers and horticultural experts have drawn sketches and proffered suggestions. But one is never in a moment’s doubt about whose garden it was — and is. Betty Miller remains firmly in control here.

Elizabeth Carey Miller was, by all accounts, a remarkable, formidable woman — rich, beautiful, brilliant, cantankerous, ambitious, controlling, willful, deaf (the result of a childhood bout with scarlet fever), and extraordinarily expert at getting her way. She even managed to turn the deafness to her advantage, “hearing” what and when and wanting to have her way, and never, ever hearing the word “no.” She was adept at lipreading (though she did complain about men who wore mustaches and smoked pipes), but as one of her gardeners puts it, the lipreading hardly mattered since she always knew what you were going to say anyway. “You never talked to Betty,” recalls long-time friend Steve Lorton, Northwest bureau chief for Sunset magazine, “you listened to Betty.”

A ravening plant collector and daring experimenter, she was also a civic leader, an organizer, an avid and competitive skier, golfer, sailor, hiker, horsewoman. The dappled banks of the Lake Washington Ship Canal was a Betty Miller project, as was the development of the University of Washington’s Center for Urban Horticulture. Her husband, the late Pendleton Miller, a Seattle attorney, endowed the CUH library in 1984 and named it for her — the Elizabeth C. Miller Horticultural Library — and after her death she overwrought it with an additional gift of $1,280,000 in 1988. Seattle’s Freeway Park and numerous traffic islands scattered throughout the city all bear the Betty Miller imprints. She fought hard for legislation restricting billboards on our streets and highways. She was a key member of the Garden Club of America, spearheading a long-term project on environmentally tolerant plants.

These were important and valuable works. But it was on her private domain that Betty Miller lavished her finest and fiercest attention. “The garden was her heart and soul and it truly was,” says her son Carey. It was also a masterpiece, a billowing tapestry that she made ever grander and richer year by year. Grand and rich for her meant rare and strange — what she seized her imagination was not the fiery mum or the dahlias the size of a dinner plate, but rather a dwarf willow that grew as a ground cover or the tender Indigofera decorum ‘Alba’, a lacy herbaceous plant that sends out tiny diamonds of white flowers, or a dwarf ash, Sorbus pectinifolia, that barely brushes one’s shin after decades. When she put in a big garden, she had to have the white, as opposed to green, skunk cabbage, imported from the Kamchatka Peninsula. One gardener I spoke to said she’d give her teeth for Betty Miller’s dwarf wisteria. Over the course of her garden’s career she went through a heath, a rhododendron phase, a fern phase, an alpine plant phase, a dwarf conifer phase. When the passion was on her, she would spend every cent to get the plant she wanted and no effort to see that it lived and prospered. And she succeeded beyond most gardeners’ wildest dreams. “There was magic in her fingers,” says Lorton. “Plants responded to her. Every thing in that garden is bigger than it is supposed to be.”

Lorton insists that to fully appreciate the garden, one must not only walk through it but also visit it from inside the house. “Betty worked like a great painter with color, texture, line, and light,” she designed the garden from inside the house by looking out the windows. Each view was a canvas, which she filled with light and lines and shapes and textures. “It’s like painting a picture.”

The analogy to painting is apt, for Mr. Miller had studied art as an undergraduate at the University of Washington and when she came to gardening, which happened rather late in her life after her children were born, she applied what she knew about painting and sculpture. She describes her covey from art to garden in this chapter devoted to her in Rosemary Verey’s book The American Woman’s Garden. “When we built our house . . . I had no particular interest in gardening and was virtually unaware of either dahlias or dandilions. But having majored in art, began to see texture, form, and color in foliage, bark, and flowers. That settled it. I began to compose pictures . . .”

Though various landscape designers helped her with drawings and plans over the years, the garden is fundamentally h.
she knew exactly what she wanted and when she wanted it to grow. And she was out there every day working on it. "She was a real dirt gardener," says Mayde Anderson, a friend for 30 years. "People who knew her got a charge out of how she dug in the soil with her em- cherful—diamond ring on. She loved to give demonstrations on how to plant." And how to prune as well. She used to make her gardeners stand by like nurses, handing her the shears and hauling away the debris while she performed delicate operations. Only after a couple of years' probation was a gardener trusted to take charge of the shears himself.

She truly loved plants—not flowers, which, she considered superfluous, but the plants themselves, the more exotic and difficult to come by the better. Like some kind of botanical drug dealer, she cultivated a worldwide network of plant dealers, keeping in close touch with promising sources in England, Australia, Asia, South America.

She amassed "a one-of-a-kind assemblage of plants," according to Richard Brown, the director of the Blooded Reserve who worked as a gardener on the Miller estate, back in the early '60s. "There are treasured indulgence collection that may not be in cultivation on the West Coast or anywhere in the country."

"The collection" makes it sounds oddly sci- entific, like butterflies spayed and mounted on display cases, but in fact, Mrs. Miller's art in arrangement and landscape was as remarkable as the diversity and rarity of her holdings. "It was a collection," Brown says, "and it was to the cleverly laid out you'd have to know, it was a collection to realise it," says Seattle horticulturist Marlene S. Krakowski, who spent a decade helping Mrs. Miller's horticulturists catalogue her treasures. "It was the most beautiful in addition to being the most interesting garden on the West Coast." Lorton ranks it with the top ten gardens in the world — and "possibly the top four" — placing it in the same league as Monet's garden at Giverny, the lush foliage garden that the late Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle- Marx created around his home in the mountains west of Rio, and Siah-ji in Kyoto, an ancient temple garden of nature trees shading an undulating forest floor of hundreds of varieties of moss.

Brown compares the overall effect of the Miller garden to bricks in a wall. Nothing stands out, the native and exotic intertwine and blend harmoniously together. It is as disconcerting as nature and obsession disguised as nonchalance. "Most collections are the plants to follow their own wishes — they put them on display where they think they look best," says Brown. "Miller was not that way. It did not matter to her whether people could see the plants or not. She knew where every plant was and how it was doing and that was all that counted. She was not afraid to break the rules, to be outrageous. And there was no one out here to stop her, to apprise her of what was chic or school her in the conventions. It's unlikely Betty Miller would have traveled so far down her own path had she lived in New York, Boston or Charleston.

She said, "She was shameless. She had these exquisite rare ferns and rhodies and then put a big ol' beastly English laurel near them. She placed an allanatha tree, which most people consider a weed, right below the deck on the western edge of the garden, overlooking the Sound. It's pretty," she insisted, 'I want it here.'" And more often than not she was right. "She was a great artist," Lorton insists, still passionate about a woman he admired. "She had a flawless sense of style."

I'd heard enough about the Miller garden before visiting to have made a rough sketch of it in my mind—leafy basins of green-filtered light, complex inter- plantings of shrubs and trees and vines, the velvety hush that only big money can buy. But I have to admit that my first quick scan of the grounds was disappointing. This is no suburban Versailles with sweeping vistas terminating in money urns. There is none of the encyclopedic grandeur of the Huntington Garden in San Marino with its global roundups of roses spread across an entire hillside and its theme park of cacti hinging in the California sun. There are no breathtaking beds of perfect annu- als. No rustic tangle of English peren- nials. No flowers at all to speak of. Subtle, cool, shaded, eccentric, Mrs. Miller's gar- den whispers in a faint, unplaceable accent.

Her highest achievement is also her quiet — an airy woodland that Cocteau might have brushed. This scrap of forest between road and house was one of the first sections of the estate that she set to work on in the most radiantly reflects her vision. Here, half a century ago, grew a typical Northwest grove of fir, cedar, maple, madrona, and huckleberry. Once Mrs. Miller got hold of the place, she stripped away everything but the choice trees and filled in the spaces with her own fantasy wilderness. English garden writer Russell Page, describing himself as "goggle-eyed with admiration" after a tour, declared it "the most erudite forest floor to be seen anywhere."

Though it all looks "natural," none of it is. Native salal and huckleberry mingle with imported rhodies like the cold-sensi- tive leathery-leaved R. macrophyllum and the flatterly Japanese R. serratifolia; maples provide shade for dwarf conifers like the hazy blue fit Atlas cypress color 'Glaucophacca.' A tiny patch of low-growing Epigaea repens — so small and insignificant-looking as to be overlook- ed or, cardinal sin, stepped on by the unwary visitor — has flourished only because of the timeless ministrations of Mrs. Miller's staff. The plants that creep and spiral and luff so easily in the shady lane are hand-watered during the dry summer months, top-dressed with compost, washed, weeded, clipped, trained, and restrained. This is an artist's forest, as fanciful in its shadings and juxtapositions of pattern and texture as the grotescoes of the Italian Renaissance villas and hermit's caves of Augustan stately parks.

Everywhere the eye falls in Mrs. Miller's woodland, a scene "composes" itself. What appears at first glance to be just another clump of shrubs and spindly trees is in fact a skilfully manipulated composition — dynamic, complex, multicultural, multicultur- istic abject. A mounded triangle slashed through with graceful vertical slashes caught my eye, and I paused on the level
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Variety of Podocarpus (a yew-like creeping shrub), dwarf sequoia, giraffe Galax (a glossy, round-leaved ground cover), Adenanthos redwood (a dwarf member of the towering sequoia family), and a fringe of robust sandpaper creeping Rhus, among many other plants.

As one moves west, descending the slope toward the Sound, the landscaping becomes ever smaller and the palette alters markedly. The beds and mounds around the house exhibit the upper Northwest gardens but almost unheard-of when Mrs. Miller planted them, and Hakonechloa mat to which looks like red Japanese beach grass and bamboo and ground covers like wisteria and epimedium. Next comes the gray garden on a dry exposed slope, with leafy and drought-tolerant plants such as Koernitz ficus, like 'Pendleton Miller' (a shrubby holly fern for Mrs. Miller's husband), the blue-flowering perennial phlox, kinnikinnick (a native ground cover that grows in a dense green mat), the leafy-leaved shrub ceanothus, and the winter-flowering shrub viburnum. A level down, on the other side of a paved parking area, are the two major rockeries, which Mrs. Miller christened "20 ton" and "40 ton" for the quantity of stone hauled in to construct them. Here she planted pelargonium (a small evergreen shrub with tubular red flowers), low cushiony mounds of Rosalba, Leucosporum (a fleshly perennial native to our western mountains), Dracophyllum (a dense carpeting greyish evergreen), and a number of flowering perennials such as Ericchorus and Helichrysum, and many other rockery plants I'd never seen or heard of before.

Below the rockeries, where the steepness of the slope relaxes, there used to be an orchard, but the Mrs. Miller pulled out the fruit trees in her final gardening years and divided the land into several distinct zones—a small bog and rosette clump of ornamental grasses; a section in which drifts of ground cover such as tough Waldsteinia ternata (a hardy ground cover) and the gray-green-leaved Vaucenraea cymbsa set off prizings of Malus sargentii (a slow-growing shrub with crab apples) and southern beeches (Nothofagus antarctica and N. dombeyi among them); and a small bank of multi-trunked Quercus oxyphylla, evergreen oaks trees native to California which give the northwest corner of the garden a kind of rancher country feel. Beside and around the oaks great masses of epimedium and wild roses catch the flickering light in wonderful ways.

Of course she lived, there would have been more. She would have continued to push out westward, reclaiming the embankment from brambles and weed beds, laying out new drifts of exquisite shrubs and ground cover, no doubt in due course terracing right down to the train tracks. She even hung her eye on the small sequoia family, and a fringe amnueshaped lawn up by the house that was planted to placate Mr. Miller. In time the grass would have been undered and the space used for something much more
interesting. But Mrs. Miller died before all her details were clear, and the grass remains, kept in a tentative condition by Rosebud's ministrations. (He shared her secret with me: every year-round mowing at least once a week, stopping only when snow covers the grass—"equally frequent—every three weeks or so—or a sufficient quantity of New Life fertilizer, again all year round; and mowing in a different pattern each time to avoid creating ruts. It seems to work, even in midwinter, the lawn looked like a putting green.)

After the complex, exquisite, trimming unity of the upper woodland and gully, the lower rockeries, bog, and grass beds feel a bit rough and planted. One can follow Mrs. Miller's tracks, trace her decision-making process down here, whereas up above the artistry is complete and invisible. But it's possible that time will take care of the sedge beds. In growing up, the lower garden may well transform itself from sketch to finished canvas. Those who worked on the garden talk about how they occasionally questioned some of Mrs. Miller's more eccentric instructions or demands, realizing only later how right she was—and why. The wit and daring and swift, instinctive rightness of her approach dawn on one slowly. The more one spends here, the more one perceives. Virgin, Turner, Monet, Kiyon, Quaint. The mind revolves through its own private store of images and associations.

Once a month, one envoy, one humble debut, one blues for one's own canvas, laid up clothes of dishes, but after a while one may also begin to wonder a bit. So much time and money and effort spent on this single corridor of earth; such vast commitments made to make what was once natural, or at least cultivated, appear more natural—to suppress the grand, to ease out the symmetrical, to hush the bold statement, to name up the alien and make it blend in with what "belongs" here. Yes, it all emanates from Mrs. Miller's dazzling vision—garden as continuous scroll of green in which no single plant, color, minute, branch, or flower would arrest the eye. But one can't help smiling—or wining—at how far she went in bringing her vision into reality. If a rhododendron's flowers were too intensely orange, she'd order the gardener to strip it clean of bloom. If two or three flowers on a given shrub or tree turned brown, she'd have all the rest of the flowers removed as well. Rather than the flag of the Queen of Flowers painting the roses red—but just as queer. Michael Bowles describes her with a fond grimace: she used to make him and the other gardeners dead-head all 400 rhododendrons on the property: "I was up in a ladder for three weeks straight." Wasn't it taking the pursuit of the perfect garden just a bit too far? There was certainly something obsessive, larger-than-life about Mrs. Miller herself. She had too much money and power and will and ambition for a woman of her estate. From her beloved in New York of the Gilded Age, or London during the Restoration, or Rome in the days of the Emperor Hadrian, whose villa still set in rolling acres outside the city would have been just her cup of tea. But she dominated and dominated. She was a grand dame in a place accustomed to dames of any sort. "She lived to scare people," admits Lor- ton, and says it more than most, even though those who knew her in her social sphere, she was used to getting her way—and who dares betry anyone who dares thwart her, or worse, failed to respect her garden.
Coke, and a hamburger with one bite taken out of it. That was pure Betty Miller.

She was not an easy person to work for," Bowdwell adds. "Her goods were going 365 days a year." She drove people crazy and made a fair number of enemies. But she got people to do what she wanted, and those who knew her well and worked with her closely felt blessed to receive her praise.

H

igh-handed yes; arbitrary at times; overbearing even in her dealings with staff and acquaintances. And yet when it came to the plants, she was hum

ble, patient, endlessly curious. To each new acquisition, she devoted hours of painstaking library research, reading up on the plant's needs and habits and prefered light, and water conditions. Once she had mastered the plant's biology, she set about replicating its environment on her own grounds, or inventing her own version of it. "She would sit for hours reading up on one plant and then come out to tell you how to grow it," is Bowdwell's take.

But it wasn't just a matter of amending the soil to grow the plant - she would actually fashion a complete microclimate around the plant. As CUH director Dr. Clement W. Hamilton puts it, "For someone not trained in botany, she did a great job of taking into account a plant's biology and ecology. Putting the right plant in the right place was the key element in her approach. What's special about her garden is the way she was able to create the right microclimate around a particular plant. She did not push the enve

lope in terms of hardness as much as others have done. But she did incorporate unusual plant material that nobody had ever grown around to using before."

The microclimate was something of an obsession with her, and she delighted in the vast number of microclimates she was able to create - or out of her own four acres. As she herself once wrote, "the microclimates seem to vary every 10 feet." Of course she had our Pacific Northwest maritime climate to help her along, a cli

mate that permits even the heaviest winter to end unaware to husband an incredible array of species, everything from semi-tropical palms to alpine conifers. But Mrs. Miller, as usual, went farther than nature, and much farther than the rest of us. Having acquired the delicate shade-loving low shrub Epigaea repens, she would plant a small screen of hardy native salal and Dry

opteris iseboldii (a drought-tolerant fern) around it. Or she'd put some tender import in a bed of Haechera cylindrica, a fairly undemanding ground cover, and leave it there until it got established. This is a techn

ique known as companion planting, and it is an area in which Mrs. Miller excelled. She sheared and cherished her plants, bumbling about woman she was, she did not note down the exacting nature of the jab, but rather relied on her instincts and her knowledge of plants.

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