

Garden Notes

Biographies + Obit
Betty Miller

Northwest Horticultural Society

Autumn 1994

Remembering

VERTICAL FILE

by Ted Marston
University of Washington
CENTER FOR URBAN HORTICULTURE
ELISABETH MILLER LIBRARY

Betty Miller

**The ancient Egyptians had a proverb
to speak the names of the dead is to make them live again.**

Betty Miller's competitive spirit, generous but often disguised nature, and ardent advocacy of horticulture will not be forgotten. Just as they pervaded her life, their evidence remains to evoke her memory time and again for us and those around us.

A woman of stylish simplicity in dress and in taste, she had a labyrinthine mind when it came to plants, their uses in the garden, and the political arenas necessary for expanding horticultural taste and making horticulture more relevant and accessible.

This woman of great beauty and intellect, personality and charm, and yes, money, knew how to use them all to great effect.

Much of her love for gardening grew from her artist's eye, ranging from the framing of a multitude of garden pictures from the windows of her house to a serious interest in beautiful books, both old and new.

All she accomplished was in the face of a major handicap, hearing loss, which would have totally daunted a lesser individual.

Broadly, her presence was directed in several areas: plants, collecting them, and learning how to make them grow in her garden; the development of programs, from small and modest to major and enduring, for the advancement of horticulture; and the luring of people into her network, friends, associates, and compatriots: nudging, encouraging, and guiding them to help her - and themselves - make a contribution to the garden world.



Elisabeth Carey Miller November 29, 1914 - March 17, 1994

Plants and the Garden

Dr. Roy Taylor, a long-time collaborator from his days as director of the University of British Columbia Botanic Garden and current president of the Chicago Horticultural Society and director of the Chicago Botanic Garden, says, "Betty had a devotion to plants not generally thought of as horticultural plants in flashy ways. She had a connoisseur's rigor in collecting, especially smaller plants. And she became an expert in recognizing the different needs of the seemingly limitless variety of plants she brought in from all over the world and developed

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microclimates to accommodate them. She really worked hard to find the niche where a particular plant would do well in her garden. I always treasured spending a few hours with her, learning where she'd heard of a plant, how she'd acquired it, and discovering how it was doing there.

"Betty really got me started on how to refine the U.S. hardiness map to do a better job of getting the right plants in the right places", explains Dr. H. Marc Cathey, president of the American Horticultural Society and former director of the National Arboretum, Washington, D.C. "She understood microclimates in an astounding way. And had an amazing grasp of detail. One spring I visited her, and she'd counted the number of inflorescences which had been dead-headed from her rhododendrons."

Mareen Kruckeberg, Northwest nursery owner and friend, puts it this way: "She used her growing knowledge of plants on her own garden, and after scrapping a designed landscape that didn't fit her new ideas, she designed her own landscape. She loved the planning and she loved the results.

"After thirty years, she was ready to slow down. The basic garden had matured, and work took on a whole different aspect, so this was a good time to make a record of the many rare and unusual plants she had acquired. She asked if I would be able to help her. It sounded like an interesting challenge, and I agreed to do it.

"By the time we worked out the best approach so we didn't miss any plant, and a long list had started to grow, a bond of friendship evolved along with a mutual respect. The work lasted twelve years because of the limited time we could devote to it each week. When we finally reached the last area, many new plants had been added and new beds were created involving numerous transplantings. By this time, our days of climbing over rocks and searching under plants for labels were over.

"Our scheduled get-togethers involved more visiting than work, but even near the end she talked about waiting for the perfect weather when we could still get out for a good morning's work...I miss her and the frequent visits to her unique and wonderful garden."

The Horticultural World

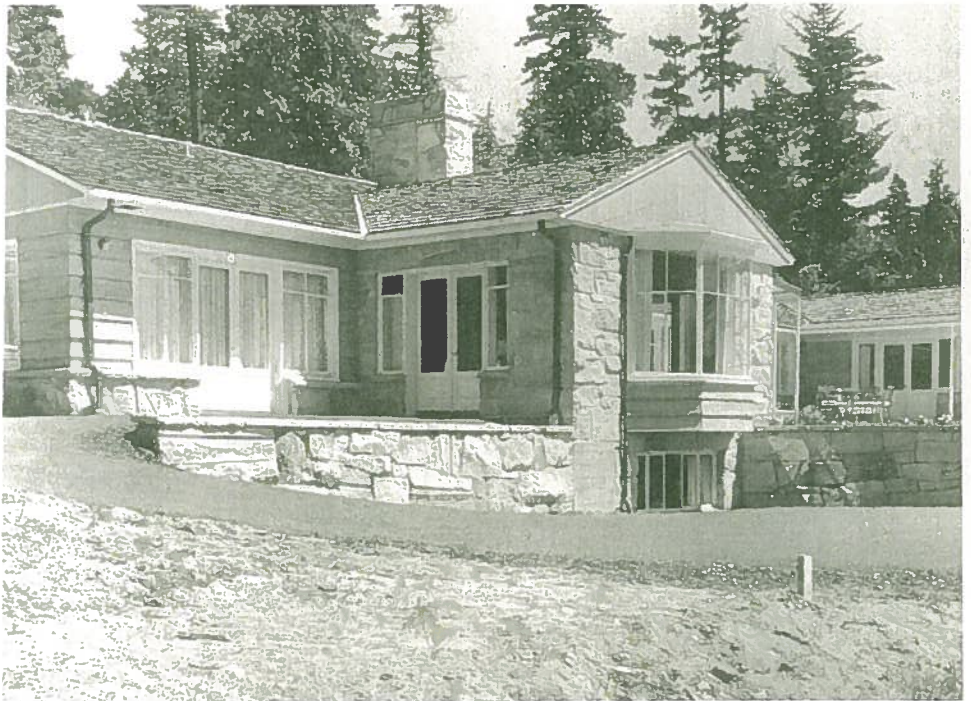
Betty Miller's activities filled many pages. And for them she won many awards, virtually every gold medal invented by the groups she worked with (and also an abundant collection of trophies

from competitive sports, including sailing, golf, and skiing.)

Two of her most enduring legacies are the Northwest Horticultural Society (which she helped found with fourteen compatriots) that led eventually to the Center for Urban Horticulture at the University of Washington.

George Beckmann, provost at the University of Washington during the CUH development period, recalls, "I remember Betty most as the driving force in creating the Center for Urban Horticulture. In the late 70's, Prentice Bloedel (Northwest philanthropist), Betty, and I met often in a private room at Rosellini's restaurant to dream and plan CUH.

"The University of Washington agreed to provide



Immediately after construction of the Miller residence in 1949...

operating dollars but due to budget cuts (it was a tough period at the University), no dollars for facilities. This didn't stop Betty. She was a very determined lady. She called upon friends, the Bloedel family, and many more, as well as healthy contributions from herself and her husband Pen to make a dream reality.

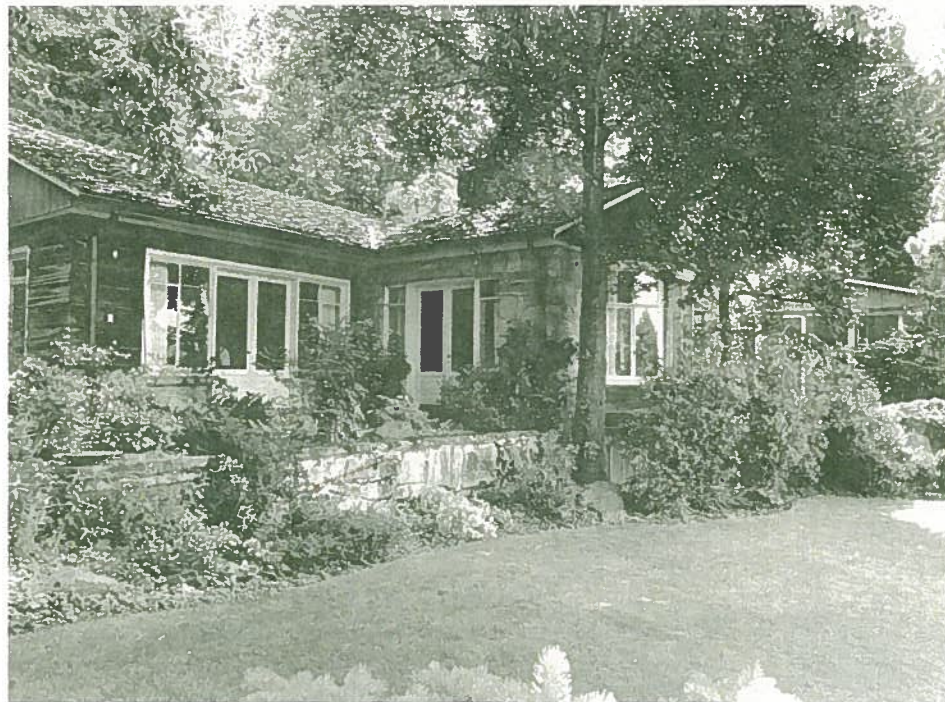
"The Center was not to be only academic in nature relating internally to the University. It was and does have a strong community orientation. Only England and Japan have the rich horticultural resources of the Pacific Northwest. CUH was planned as a new base for horticultural lectures, extension courses, and a first-rate horticultural library."

As we all know, CUH does include a library, funded by Pendleton Miller in Betty's name...and as Betty was fond of saying, "It's the best horticultural library north of California and west of Chicago."

Laura Lipton, librarian at the Library since 1985,

reminisces, "Betty particularly admired the Sterling Morton Library at the the Morton Arboretum (suburban Chicago), and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Her goal was to model our new library after the Morton, which had a staff of seven. She hoped to create a library equally fine for the Pacific Northwest, a library for posterity, which would serve and inspire future generations of gardeners. She believed that a tremendous number of individuals, garden clubs, and horticultural groups would all join together in realizing this vision.

"By 1988, the Library had outgrown its space, and Betty spearheaded a plan to build a new addition which would double



...and forty-five years later.

our space, provide offices and storage, and create a rare book room for the special books which were close to her heart. (A statue of St. Fiacre, patron saint of gardens and libraries, which resided in Betty's garden, is now in the Library's rare book room.) With a very generous gift from the Pendleton Miller estate, construction began in 1989, and the new addition was formally dedicated on May 25, 1990.

"No sooner had the paint dried on the new addition than her mind was off and running with new ideas — this time for a lending library that would draw new users into the Library. Money was raised from the Northwest Horticultural Society and the Rare Plant Group of the Garden Club of America, and soon another of Betty's visions became a reality."

Bringing People and Gardens Together

Richard Brown, director of Washington's Bloedel Reserve and current NHS president, asked Betty if he could privately propagate some plants for a specialty nursery he was planning to start. She promptly countered with an offer to work for her as a gardener. "What began that day in 1965 developed into a long and lasting friendship. She opened my eyes to a form of gardening (for public enjoyment and education) that I had not seen before.

"Her insistence on working from knowledge and not guesswork stimulated me to seek more botanical training, to collect and observe plants in the wild, and to enjoy them for

many subtle as well as dramatic reasons.

She introduced me in many ways to learning about plants and to people capable of helping me develop my horticultural interest. And when I went east to school (facilitated by her contacts), she continued to keep me informed on what was happening locally of horticultural interest.

"As I think back over those years, of her influence on me, and our our many discussions, I have to think that I was particularly blessed by having a mentor/advisor like Betty. My guess is that most young people today are not the beneficiaries of such supportive and guiding counsel. Perhaps we all need to remember when we speak to others about our interests and activities, particularly to the younger, that we might be the deciding factor that causes a change in another's life."

My own example of Betty's puckish humor and devious direction came when I was chairing the annual meeting of the

Garden Writer's Association of America in Seattle, and it irritated it me immensely at the time. She suggested that *Koelreutaria paniculata* would be a great selection for a tree planting ceremony on Fairview Avenue next to Lake Union, which we planned to appropriately photograph and publicize. But she didn't know where it was available, the plant being both choice and rare at the time. After calling at least a dozen nurseries, I finally found one, and when I told her later how much time it had taken (which at the time I didn't feel I had to spare), she flashed that big smile, her eyes snapped, and she chuckled, "Oh, I know, but how can we get the nurseries to stock it if we don't ask for it?" And then told me that she'd known all along which local nursery had the tree.

From Connie McCord, a longtime friend: "Betty had such a good sense of humor and was really good fun. She was very artistic. She tried in her lifetime a little bit of everything -

Mary Randlett



Mary Randlett

Where plants are treasured.

she skied, golfed, sketched, and even tried her hand a sculpting. She was a perfectionist - she wanted to do everything well or did not want to do it at all. She was a very loyal friend, and I miss her."

Michael Lynn remembers, "At first Betty terrified me. As the newly elected president of NHS, I had many, many command performances with Betty, always at toddy time (one short brandy), or Sunday morning. Betty wanted to make certain I understood the history, importance, and significance of NHS. Abject terror soon softened into deep respect. Betty's passion, commitment, determination, and dedication to horticulture and the role of NHS were inspiring.

Can't...couldn't...wouldn't - were not in Betty's vocabulary - rather, 'how can we best get the job done?'. I feel cheated, my exposure to Betty was too short; she was and is my horticultural conscience and mentor. Yes, you guessed it, from fear to respect to love."

Marili Boyd, another friend and former NHS president, also met with Betty on Sundays. "Sunday mornings were Betty's favorite to chat about her thoughts, her plans and concerns in the all-encompassing horticultural world. At times, this hour became a challenge to my domestic bliss, and yet I never regretted any time spent with Betty. It was she who channeled my interest in all of nature in the proper direction. And it was her enthusiasm, her dedication, and her immense knowledge that made me think of her as a mentor. When obstacles presented a challenge to Betty, we tackled them by means of lengthy discussion, and it pleases me to think that I may have helped her find a solution at times.

"While reminiscing how few people have made a difference in my life, I can wholeheartedly say that Betty was one of them.

"I visited her at home two or three days before she last went into the hospital. There she was in bed with garden books and catalogs spread around her, as deeply immersed as ever in the garden world."

Steve Lorton, Northwest Bureau Chief of *Sunset Magazine*, was drawn into Betty's orbit. "She was an indisputably remarkable woman, but not always easy. We became good friends. I recall one of the most memorable moments in my professional career when we were photographing at her place, an editor, a photographer, and I. When Betty saw the photographer's foot had moved about one quarter of an inch onto a treasured ground cover, she glared at him as only Betty could, and within a split second he was the recipient of a nonsense whack. Soon after, I found her in the library, clearly upset by her emphatic, dramatic response to the lack of awareness that threatened her plants. After a time, and some conversation, calm returned.

"We often had lunch together at the Seattle Golf Club and both chose either the crab sandwich or omelet. Both came with toast and fruit. While Betty usually picked at her food, I'd end up eating her toast and fruit, too. Once, when we were joined by a distinguished plantsman from England, the conversation became so animated that I, without thinking, starting filching the food from Betty's plate. As the plantsman's astonished look deepened to dismay, Betty said: 'Don't mind Steve, he knows what he's doing.'

"Betty asked me to help get attention for the Miller Library, which was very important to her. *Sunset* did a major story on it, another piece appeared in the *Arboretum Bulletin* which I was involved with, and I managed to plant an article in another publication. I wrote her and said: 'You owe Steve Lorton big time and the debt can only be paid by: 1. One of the copper beeches from your garden, and 2. Scratching my back for one-half hour.' The copper beech arrived promptly. A short time later I received a drawing showing Betty scratching my back with a garden rake. I'll treasure that drawing forever.

"We had many disagreements, but twenty-four hours later she'd call and want to talk. My secret was to always send her notes so that I was sure we communicated. Sometimes I even asked the ladies who tended her home to pass teasing messages to Betty.

"I have an indelible memory of Betty which includes her house with unobstructed views from her windows out to her garden. Each window was like the frame of a picture in a gallery where she could watch the subtle changes of nature.

"Betty always kept her sense of humor. She loved to scare people. She was domineering, maddening, loving, outrageously committed, and kept her promises. No cliché could describe her uniqueness. I owe her tremendously. I loved her and miss her terribly."

Betty, you have made sure that we will not forget.

Ted Marston had known Betty since 1975.

Betty Miller's Significant Public Projects

Lake Washington Ship Canal

Under the sponsorship of the Garden Club of America, raised \$40,000 by private solicitation for the initiation of a comprehensive plan involving the Lake Washington Ship Canal. Enlisted the support of United States Army Corps of Engineers, City of Seattle, and other governmental agencies, resulting in the plantings and horticultural development of a number of miles along the Lake Washington Ship Canal connecting Lake Washington with Puget Sound.

Operation Triangle

Acted as a principal horticultural advisor for Operation Triangle, which developed plans resulting in the planting of traffic islands of various sizes throughout the City of Seattle.

Billboard Legislation

Founded the Washington State Roadside Council, which was primarily responsible for initiating legislation to control the use of billboards on or near city streets, county roads, and state highways. The Council's efforts resulted in the adoption by the Washington State Legislature of a model act relating to the control of billboards.

Elisabeth C. Miller Horticultural Library at the University of Washington

Contributed the expansion and further endowment of the library in 1988 which was initially given and endowed by Pen Miller in 1984.

Northwest Horticultural Society

Founded this organization which initiated and supported the development of the Center for Urban Horticulture, University of Washington.

Seattle Park Department

Served as horticultural consultant for the landscape design of Freeway Park by Lawrence Halprin and Associates, 1974-76. Horticultural advisor for the Chinese Classical Garden.

Garden Club of America

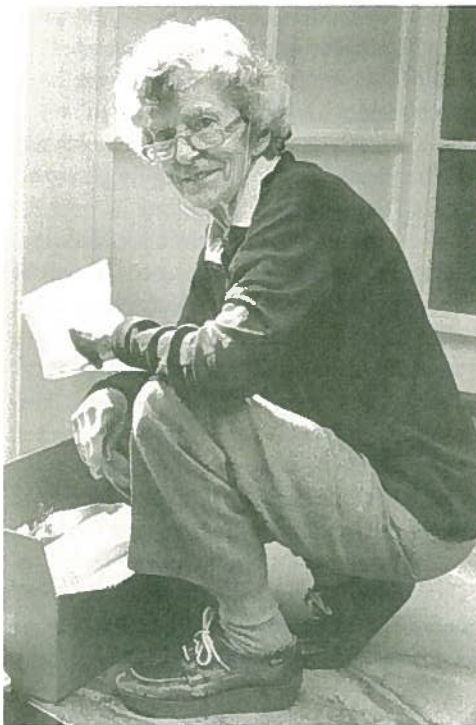
Initiated in 1979, as a member of the Horticultural Committee, a long-range project on environmentally tolerant plants, a two-year national survey program to be followed by another two-year program in 1981 on environmentally tolerant plants not readily available in nurseries. Continued to pilot this project as GCA Horticultural Committee Advisor progressing to "Plants That Merit Attention" in 1982. Under this title, the Garden Club of America sponsored a 1984 publication on environmentally tolerant plants.

Other Projects

Development of Gerber Park, 1960, Seattle Engineering Department.

Chairman and initiator of Northwest Ornamental Horticultural Society's Horticultural Festival, 1960, Seattle Metropolitan Area Bicentennial event.

Honorary Sponsor of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society's 150th Anniversary, 1979.



Mary Randlett