

# 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*

**B**etty 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 in 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

*Right: In the orchard area, the Japanese native shrub *Disanthus cercidifolius* is among plants providing brilliant fall color. Inset: Ken Gambrill, who will become curator of Betty Miller's garden; Steve Balint, who succeeded John Fischer as Miller's landscape designer; and Miller.*









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*, *Tripetaleia paniculata*, *Rhododendron macabeianum*, *R. desquamatum* 'Finch', and *R. fictolacteum*. Under this layer is a seasonal spring fantasy of intermingled species of *Trillium*, *Roscoea*, *Arisaema*, and



**Gaultheria adenostrix berries and blooms.** It is one of several representatives of the species planted on and around old fir logs in the wooded area.

*Paeonia*. Among the small shrubs, *Tsusio-phyllum tanakae*, *Rhododendron crinigerum*, and *R. amagianum* are favorites.

Years ago, old growth logs of fir were scattered throughout this wooded area. On and around these natural "sculptures," one finds *Vaccinium ovalifolium*, species of *Gaultheria* and *Cassiope*, as well as five species of *Shortia*, which now encompasses the *Schizocodon* species from Asia. The latter are placed in filtered shade, for they won't tolerate the intensity of the noonday sun. The eastern bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*) does well, but both

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 (*Linnaea borealis*) highlight the forest floor. Also to be found here are the Asiatic gold-thread (*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-*

*dendron aralioides*), dwarf evergreen oaks, small-leaved rhododendrons, and such dwarf conifers as the 'Fletcheri' Douglas fir and the 'Adpressa' redwood.

Behind the house is a steep bank that descends eventually to Puget Sound and an area of Northwestern natives. The bank has a brutal western exposure, with the summer sun directly overhead and searing reflections from the sound and the walls of the house. Shrubs cover this bank effectively. Different species of *Podocarpus* or dwarf forms of the evergreen *Lithocarpus* provide varying shades of green; color is found in the foliage of *Rubus tricolor* and the species and hybrids of the blue-flowered *Ceanothus*. The native salal also does well in the sun, producing white flowers, reddish leaves, and striking black fruit. *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* 'Point Reyes' and *Cotoneaster microphyllus* 'Cochlearius' display small but brilliant red fruits. *Xanthorhiza simplicissima* has dissected foliage that is a brilliant yellow in the fall; *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides* brings accents of blue. Near the edge of the asphalt Miller has *Rosa rubrifolia* with its glaucous purplish foliage and bright red oval hips. Even a propensity for developing fuzzy yellow galls does not diminish the value of this shrub. Finally, *Rubus calycinoides* from Formosa serves as a tough ground cover that creeps out on the pavement.

The orchard area to the west of this bank is the most recent development. Here one finds outstanding examples of evergreen oaks, interesting willows, the spectacular bark of *Acer ginnala*, *Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana*, *Syringa reflexa*, and *Parrotia persica*. When in full fruit, *Garrya elliptica* catches the eye, as does an unusual *Ginkgo biloba* with elongated narrow leaves. An old *Malus sargentii* was an unexpected find and is perhaps the best plant of its kind in any American garden. It is always exciting to find a southern beech (*Nothofagus*), and here one can see *N. antarctica*, *N. dombeyi*, and *N. procera* from South America grown as specimen trees. Brilliant fall color will be found in *Cladrastis sinensis*, *Rhus trichocarpa*, *Acer truncatum*, *A. japonicum* 'Aconitifolium', *Disanthus cercidifolius*, *Enkianthus campanulatus*, and *Fothergilla major*.

Ground covers keep the orchard's soil cool by foliage transpiration. *Waldsteinia ternata* is one of Miller's favorites, for the plants are tough underfoot and their foliage does not detach but decomposes to

## 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. Outstanding in this regard are species of coral-bells (*Heuchera*). In large areas *Vancouveria chrysantha* 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 camtschatcense*) with its opaque



white spathes, can be seen among plants of *Ledum glandulosum*, *Kalmia microphylla*, and *Philesia magellanica*.

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 verecunda* var. *yakusimana*) 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 *Gaultheria miqueliana* with its white fruits or *Gaultheria adenothrix* with crimson fruits; or perhaps it is the *Stauntonia hexaphylla* 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 accessory 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 slat house contains a collection of vireya 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 temper-

ature 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 Gambrill 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 lo-

cation of each plant in her collection, with the help of horticulturists Mareen Kruckeberg 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 people has been selected to guide the future of this remarkable collection.

Down in one corner of the orchard is a very large stand of clovers in a predominantly four-leaved 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.

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## A Lady of Myriad Achievements

A look at the horticultural accomplishments and environmental contributions of Elisabeth Carey Miller makes it difficult to believe she was ever a novice gardener who struggled with petunias and 'Gumpo' azaleas. She was a founder of the Washington State Roadside Council, where her service and influence on the horticulture of roadsides and parks is legendary. The Roadside Council and Miller are credited with shaping the model act that controls billboards. She was a horticultural consultant for Seattle's noted Operation Triangle, which mapped out plantings for traffic islands throughout the city. She served as horticulturist for Lawrence Halprin's landscaping of Seattle's Freeway Park, and has written and lectured on the need to know the pollution tolerances of plants chosen for urban, environmentally stressed locations. For many years Miller was a collaborator of the late Carl S. English Jr. in his landscaping of the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks, and they shared plant introductions. She was instrumental in raising private funds contributed to the horticultural improvements along the Lake Washington Ship Canal.

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 Northwest Ornamental Horticultural Society. She was awarded a gold medal from the International Botanical Congress for her role in their 1969 exhibit of Ericaceous plants. At the national level Miller has been active in the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta, 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).*



