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Biography of Elizabeth Miller



A GARDENER'S GARDEN

By David Laskin



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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 Sissinghurst and Hidcote, or, on this side of the Atlantic, Henry Francis DuPont’s Winterthur outside of Wilmington, Delaware or Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC. And yet, hidden away in the northern fringes of the city there is indeed an estate garden of extraordinary delicacy and lush, even eccentric originality.

The Garden of Elisabeth 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, iron resolve, dogged persistence, and sufficient resources 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 a much larger estate in the late 1940s, from a sandy tangle of underbrush and second-growth woods into a gorgeous, complex tissue of living things — truly a realm unto itself.

At her 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 chaperoned 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 gossiping 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 “pussyfooting 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 in a limited way through Daniel Hinkley’s Heronswood Nursery in Kingston, which propagates a number of rare plants from the Miller garden and sells them through its catalog. The thorn is the issue of visitation.

Those close to the garden either won’t talk about the subject of visitors or insist that they’re carrying out 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 just 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 shaft 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 spade to soil if not to conjure up ideal order?

Here in the Miller Garden, even more than in most great gardens, the creator hovers near, almost oppressively close at hand. Mrs. Miller is the ghost in her garden,



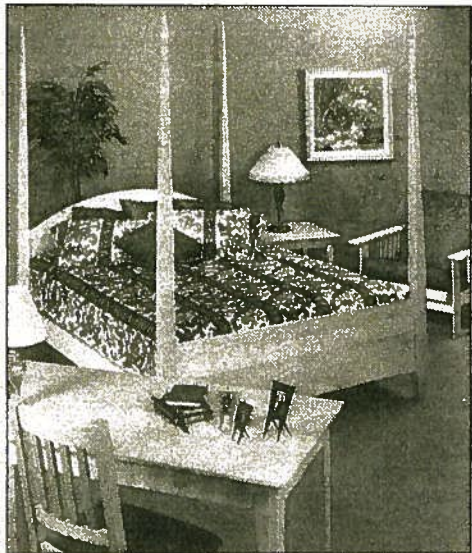
Garden photos by David Stockdale

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.

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A GARDENER'S GARDEN

Betty Miller, on how she became a gardener: 'Having majored in art I began to see texture, form, and color in foliage, bark, and flowers. That settled it I began to compose pictures.'



the guardian spirit kneeling just out of sight behind that *Osmunda japonica* fern, frowning 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.

Elisabeth 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 she wanted to hear, 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 ravenous 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 Elisabeth C. Miller Horticultural Library — and after his death she oversaw its expansion with an additional gift of \$1,280,000 in 1988. Seattle's Freeway Park and numerous traffic islands scattered around the city all bear the Betty Miller imprint. 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, 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 seized her imagination was not the fiery mum or the dahlia the size of a dinner plate, but rather a dwarf willow that grows as a ground cover or the tender *Indigofera decora* 'Alba,' a lacy herbaceous plant that sends out tiny diamonds of white flowers, or a dwarf ash, *Sorbus poterifolia*, that barely brushes one's shin after decades. When she put in a bog 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 gardening career she went through a heath phase, a rhododendron phase, a fern phase, an alpine plant phase, a dwarf conifer phase. When the passion was on her, she would spare no expense 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's supposed to be."

Lorton insists that to fully appreciate the garden, one must not only walk through it but also view 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 window was a canvas, which she filled with shapes and lines that pulled the eye out into the landscape."

The analogy to painting is apt, for Mrs. 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 crossover from art to garden in the 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 daffodils or dandelions. But having majored in art, I 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 her

creation — she knew exactly what she wanted and where 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 emerald-cut 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 czar, 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 Bloedel Reserve who worked as a gardener on the Miller estate back in the early ’60s. “There are items in her collection that may not be in cultivation on the West Coast or anywhere in the country.”

“Collection” makes it sound aridly academic, like butterflies splayed and mounted in a display case, but in fact, Mrs. Miller’s art in arrangement and landscaping was as remarkable as the diversity and variety of her holdings. “It was a collection, but it was so cleverly laid out you’d have to know it was a collection to realize it,” says Seattle horticulturist Mareen S. Kruckeberg, who spent a decade helping Mrs. Miller identify and 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 Siahō-ji in Kyoto, an ancient temple garden of mature 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 art disguised as nature and obsession disguised as nonchalance. “Most collectors force the plants to follow their own wishes — they put them on display where they think they look best,” says Brown. “Mrs. Miller was not that type. 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.

Says Lorton: “She was shameless. She’d have these exquisite rare ferns and rhodies and then put a big old trashy English laurel next to them. She placed an ailanthus 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

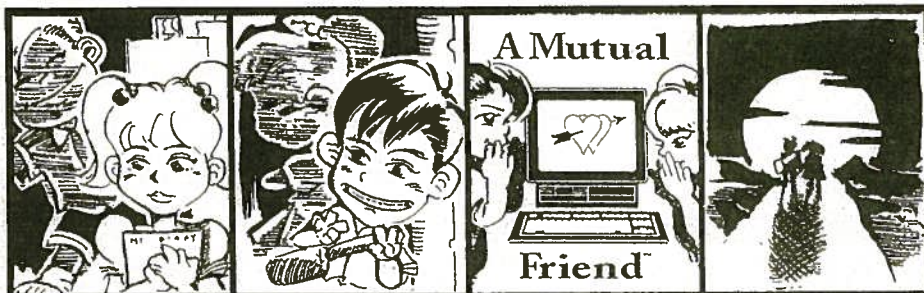
often than not she was right. “She was a great artist,” Lorton insists, still passionate about a woman he admired. “She had a flawless sense of style.”

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 interplantings 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 mossy urns. There is none of the encyclopedic grandeur of the Huntington Garden in San Marino with its global roundup of roses spread across an entire hillside and its theme park of cacti baking in the California sun. There are no breathtaking beds of perfect annuals. No rustic tangle of English perennials. No flowers at all to speak of. Subtle, cool, shaded, eccentric, Mrs. Miller’s garden whispers in a faint, unplaceable accent.

Her highest achievement is also her quietest — an airy woodland that Corot 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 and it most radiantly reflects her vision. Here, half a century ago, grew a typical Northwest grove of fir, cedar, maple, madroña, and hemlock. 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-sensitive leathery-leafed *R. macabeanum* and the fluttery little Japanese *R. linearifolium*; maples provide shade for dwarf conifers like the hazy blue fir *Abies concolor* ‘Glauca Compacta.’ A tiny patch of low-growing *Epigaea asiatica* — so small and insignificant-looking as to be overlooked or, cardinal sin, stepped on by the unwary visitor — has flourished only because of the tireless ministrations of Mrs. Miller’s staff. The plants that creep and spiral and luff so easily in the sylvan shade are hand-watered during the dry summer months, top-dressed with compost, washed, weeded, clipped, trained, and restrained. In the autumn the leaves are raked and blown away, all but a final scattering left for pinpoints of color and light mulch. The very soil is an import, with huge mounds of the native sand and clay excavated, carted away, churned up, turned over, and amended with tons and tons of compost in order to create a medium that would hold water and drain properly. Even the stumps and boulders have been laboriously extracted from state forests and placed where Mrs. Miller wanted them. This is an artist’s forest, as fanciful in its shadings and juxtapositions of pattern and texture as the grottoes 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 shrewdly manipulated composition — a dynamic, complex, multicultural, multiclimatic abstract design. A mounded triangle slashed through with graceful vertical stalks caught my eye, and I paused on the level



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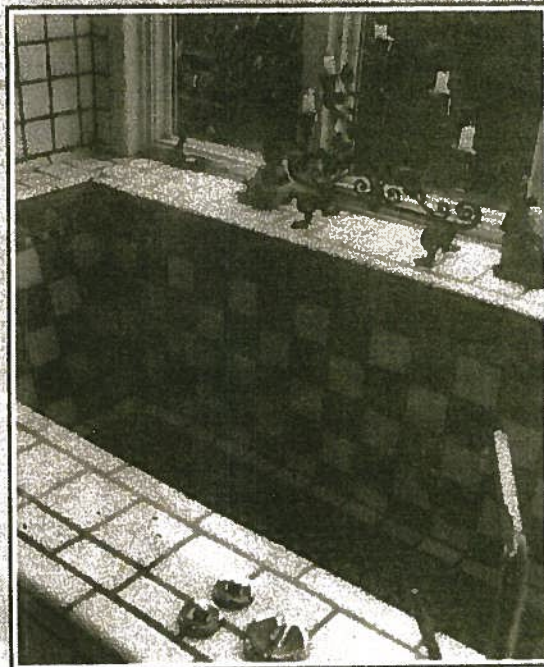
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A GARDENER'S GARDEN



variety of *Podocarpus* (a yew-like creeping shrub), dwarf sequoia, graceful *Galax* (a glossy, round-leaved ground cover), Adpressa redwood (a dwarf member of the towering sequoia family), and a fringe of robust sandpaper creeping *Rubus*, among many other plants.

As one moves west, descending the slope toward the Sound, the plantings become younger and the palette alters markedly. The beds and borders around the house (itself an impressively sedate structure of cedar and sandstone by the Seattle architect Daniel Lamont) have a kind of jewel-box quality, with dwarf conifers set off by ornamental grasses (including black and green

Nothing stands out, the native and exotic intertwine. It is art disguised as nature and obsession disguised as nonchalance.

mondo grass, now familiar in Northwest gardens but almost unheard-of when Mrs. Miller planted them, and *Hakonechloa macra*, which looks like a cross between beach grass and bamboo) and ground covers like wintergreen and epimedium. Next comes the gray garden on a dry exposed slope, with heat- and drought-tolerant plants such as Korean fir, *Ilex* 'Pendleton Miller' (a shrubby holly named for Mrs. Miller's husband), the blue-flowering perennial plumbago, kinnikinnick (a native ground cover that grows in a dense green mat), the leathery-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 penstemon (a small evergreen shrub with tubular flowers), low cushiony mounds of *Bolax*, *Lewisia* (a fleshy-leaved perennial native to our western mountains), *Dryas octopetala* 'Minor' (a shrubby, mat-forming, white-flowered perennial), *Raoulia monroi* (a dense carpeting grayish creeper), aster-flowered perennials such as *Erigeron* and *Helichrysum*, and many other rockery plants I'd never seen or heard of before.

path to admire this three-dimensional botanical Kandinsky while head gardener Michael Boswell reeled off the plants for me: In the foreground our stalwart native Oregon grape keeps company with the *Pieris japonicum* 'Cavatine' (a small-leaved Asian shrub which bears tiny clusters of blueberry-like flowers in early spring), and gem-like tiny *Cyclamen coum* in delicate white bloom; a healthy looking drift of the difficult-to-transplant ground cover *Cornus canadensis* offsets a stand of *Carex flacca* — a medium-growing grass. The middle ground is a kind of minuet of green — the jagged edges of sword fern playing off a frothy mound of salal and the bolder ovals of the waist-high evergreen shrub *Helleborus x sternii*. And finally, in the background, two different kinds of huckleberries — an evergreen and deciduous — anchor the whole composition while a decaying snag and a skinny Douglas fir trunk insert twin exclamation points just off center.

There are scores, even hundreds of these vivid tableaux in the Miller Garden. This is a garden of layers — canopy, middle layer, forest floor — and as the plantings have matured, the layers have intermingled, invading and erasing each other in wonderful ways. "The most extraordinary thing about the garden is the way it holds your interest all the way up from the ground to the sky," notes Dave Stockdale, in charge of public and professional education at the CUH and currently embarked on a long-term project of photographing the garden at regular intervals. "There are lots of two-dimensional gardens, but this one is three-dimensional. The ground covers, the small shrubs and trees, and the canopy layer are all woven together. The attention to detail extends all the way to the top."

One sees this botanical mosaic to most striking effect in the upper woodland, the oldest, most fully realized, and to most eyes most successful section of the garden. Of the same fine vintage is the adjacent section known as the gully — a cascading rockery between woodland and drive planted with weeping cedar, a low-growing

Below the rockeries, where the steepness of the slope relaxes, there used to be an orchard, but Mrs. Miller pulled out the fruit trees in her final gardening years and divided the land into several distinct zones — a small bog and rustling clump of ornamental grasses; a section in which drifts of ground cover such as tough *Waldsteinia ternata* (often mistaken for strawberry plants) and the gray-green-leaved *Vancouveria chrysantha* set off prizes like *Malus sargentii* (a slow-growing shrubby crabapple) and southern beeches (*Nothofagus antarctica* and *N. dombeyi* among them); and a charming stand of multi-trunked *Quercus chrysolepis*, evergreen oaks trees native to California which give the northwest corner of the garden a kind of rancho courtyard feel. Beneath and around the oaks great masses of epimedium and wild roses catch the flickering light in wonderful ways.

Of course had she lived, there would have been more. She would have continued to push out westward, reclaiming the embankment from brambles and weed trees, laying out new drifts of exquisite shrubs and ground cover, no doubt in due course terracing right down to the train tracks. She even had her eye on the small amoeba-shaped lawn up by the house that was planted to placate Mr. Miller. In time the grass would have been spaded under and the space used for something much more

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interesting. But Mrs. Miller died before all her dreams came true, and the grass remains, kept in mint condition through Boswell's ministrations. (He shared his secret with me: year-round mowing at least once a week, stopping only when snow covers the grass; frequent — every three weeks or so — but light doses of New Life Fertilizer, again all year round; and mowing in a different pattern each time to avoid creating ruts. It seems to work, for even in midwinter, the lawn looked like a putting green.)

After the complex, exquisite, brimming 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 jagged edges: 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 years later how right she was — and why. The wit and daring and swift, instinctive rightness of her approach dawn on one slowly. The more time one spends here, the more one perceives. Virgil. Turner. Monet. Kyoto. Quinault. The mind revolves through its own private store of images and associations.

One admires, one envies, one humbly learns, one blushes for one's own crass little plot of clichés, 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 resources committed to make what was once natural, or at least uncultivated, appear more natural — to suppress the grand, to root out the symmetrical, to hush the bold statement, to nurse 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, texture, branch, or flower would arrest the eye. But one can't help smiling — or wincing — at how far she went to bring her vision into reality. If a rhododendron's flowers were too intensely orange, she'd order the gardeners 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 like the flip side of the Queen of Hearts painting the roses red — but just as queer. Michael Boswell describes with a fond grimace how she used to make him and the other gardeners dead-head all 400 rhodies on the place: "I was up in a ladder for three weeks straight." Wasn't this taking the pursuit of the perfect garden just a bit too far?

There was certainly something excessive, larger-than-life about Mrs. Miller herself. She had too much money and power and will and ambition for a city like Seattle. She belonged in New York of the Gilded Age, or London during the Restoration, or Rome in the days of the Emperor Hadrian, whose artful villa set in rolling pleasure grounds outside the city would have been just her cup of tea. But here she dominated and domineered. She was a grande dame in a place unaccustomed to dames of any sort. "She loved to scare people," admits Lorton. Far more than most of us, even those who move in her social sphere, she was used to getting her way — and woe betide anyone who tried to thwart her, or worse, failed to respect her garden.

Her friends, staff, and gardening cronies all have their favorite Betty Miller stories, usually involving the violent punishments she meted out to those who accidentally stepped on her plants. She once hauled off and slugged a photographer for treading on the outer fringe of a ground cover. She regularly — and loudly — threw people off her estate when their hands or feet landed where she didn't want them to be. House painters, window washers, masons, stone-movers all lived in terror of her.

Invited guests also had to dodge the bullets. Boswell recalls hearing her voice clear across the estate as she bellowed out exit orders to some plant-crushing klutz with death in his shoes. Even the soil was off-limits: One was to step on cedar rounds covered in anti-skid netting, never the precious black earth, which might be concealing God knows what dormant treasure. Richard Brown comments delicately on this aspect of her character: "If someone was scattering cigarette ashes on your living-room rug, you normally wouldn't say anything, much as you'd want to. But Mrs. Miller definitely would confront people. She tended to be rather abrupt. She made her displeasure well-known — in a proper but strong way." Says Mareen Kruckeberg, herself the cultivator of a large private garden: "The plants were so precious to her, I can sympathize with how she behaved. I just don't have that much nerve." Nerve was definitely one of Betty Miller's strong suits.

Maybe her humble Montana background had something to do with it. Raised in Kalispell, where her father was the agent for the Kalispell tribe, she spent her early years in a dirt-floor farmhouse. The family moved to Spokane when she was a teenager, and Betty went on to the University of Washington. Marriage to Pendleton Miller, a partner at the law firm once known as Lane, Powell, Moss, and Miller, brought her a substantial amount of money and entrée into the "old Seattle" upper crust. The Millers, longtime owners of substantial timber property, have been Seattle civic leaders going right back to the beginning of the city: Pendleton Miller's father was a regent of the University of Washington for 38 years, and his grandfather was chief justice of the Supreme Court of Washington Territory.

Betty Miller adapted easily to this rarefied social milieu, but she never really stopped being the tough, scrappy, independent girl from Montana. "She loved being rich," remarks Lorton, "but she didn't really care who had money and who didn't. She was gloriously American. There was not an elitist bone in her body. She was Annie Oakley." She smoked like a chimney, drank martinis, drove a Cadillac, dressed smartly but simply, and did what she damn well pleased. Dixy Lee Ray (who, as governor, appointed Mrs. Miller to a briefly-held position as UW regent) and Bunny DuPont were among her friends, but gardening ultimately meant more to her than money, power, and prestige.

The only aristocracy she truly recognized was that of the plant kingdom. If you knew your rhodies or dwarf conifers or ferns, you counted no matter where you lived or what kind of car you drove. When her neighbors were buying mink coats, she was buying moss-covered rocks for her woodland. Then she'd proudly point them out to visitors and say, "This is my mink." Lorton recalls attending a birthday party for Mrs. Miller at which the centerpiece was a wheelbarrow artfully arranged with soil, fertilizer, gardening tools, a can of Diet

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A GARDENER'S 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," Boswell admits. "Her gears 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.

High-handed yes; arbitrary at times; overbearing often in her dealings with staff and acquaintances. And yet when it came to the plants, she was humble, patient, endlessly curious. To each new acquisition she devoted hours of painstaking library research, reading up on the plant's needs and habits and preferred soil, light, and water conditions. Once she had mastered the plant's biography, 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 us, 'Add more sand,'" is Boswell's take.

But it wasn't just a matter of amending the soil or providing shade or shelter — she would actually fashion a complete microclimate around the plant. As CUH director Dr. Clement W. Hamilton puts it, "For someone not trained in horticulture, 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 envelope in terms of hardiness as much as others have done. But she did incorporate unusual plant material that nobody had ever gotten 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 squeeze into (or out of) her 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 climate that permits even the heedless weekend amateur 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 shrublet *Epigaea repens*, she would plant a small screen of hardy native salal and *Dryopteris sieboldii* (a drought-tolerant fern) around it. Or she'd put some tender import in a bed of *Heuchera cylindrica*, a fairly undemanding ground cover, and leave it there until it got established. This is a technique known as companion planting, and it is an area in which Mrs. Miller excelled.

She revered and cherished her plants, but being the woman she was, she did not

coddle them. She believed that competition and adaptation to hardship were good for plants: a kind of rarefied Darwinian survival of the fittest prevailed in her garden. Instead of dumping water on plants in the dry summer months, she placed them close together so they would keep each other moist and humid. No fertilizer was applied aside from a top-dressing of compost. And poisons were kept to a minimum. "It's not 100 percent chemical free," says Zatz, "but it's the least toxic garden I've ever been in — maybe a few quarts of Roundup a year. If things get chewed by insects, it shows." She pioneered in what we now call integrated plant management, with drainage, water requirements, light, temperature, air circulation, and the plants' relationships with each other all carefully taken into account. It paid off: Those who know gardens recognize this as a remarkably lush and healthy landscape.

Of course, nature and bugs have occasionally taken their toll. There have been some notable failures over the years. The 1,000 different species of plants now flourishing in the garden are the happy survivors — just as many varieties have fallen by the wayside. Like all good gardeners, Mrs. Miller was ruthless when she had to be.

Ruthless but not reckless. She rose to challenges, she experimented boldly, she took shots in the dark. But once a plant found its ideal home, she usually left it where it was. She was not the type to yank things up on a whim. She respected nature too much to tamper with its essential laws. Respect for nature is plain in her approach to pruning. To prune was perhaps the prime commandment Mrs. Miller gardened by. She pruned everything and pruned compulsively. No big dense spherical specimen trees or topiary shrubs for her. She and the gardeners even took the shears to the lowly Oregon grape, carving our spiny native into feathery Japanese arabesques.

She strove throughout for a light and airy effect. It delighted her to look through one plant, or one layer, or one story to another. Thus the golden rain tree affords glimpses of the delicate blue flowers of the *Clematis macropetala* climbing through it. The shorn fir displays a scarf of climbing hydrangea. The pared-down rhododendron reveals its tensile skeleton. And the appearance of each pruned tree and shrub alters with the seasons. Ultimately, Mrs. Miller was playing as much with space as with plants — using plants to create, enhance, trick out, highlight, reconfigure space. "When she pruned, her concern was what kind of spaces to create between branches," Richard Brown recalls. "She was looking at the holes while we were looking at the limbs." Says Lorton: "She told the gardeners that when they pruned they should go 'one, two, cut a branch,

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A GARDENER'S GARDEN

one, two, cut a branch.' The thinned-out trees created a spiraling effect. Air blew through, it slowed the growth of trees, but they never looked shaved." Clem Hamilton adds that the heavy pruning allowed her to grow as many different kinds of plants as she did.

Mrs. Miller did on occasion take pruning, as everything else, to extremes. Michael Boswell tells of the time he tried to convince her to spare the towering, densely needled pine that ascends in an evergreen column in a prominent spot on the west side of the house. Determined to have it her way, Mrs. Miller insisted that he strip away the lower branches. The next day she admitted her mistake: "It looks like a Q-tip," she wailed.

A more successful pruning endeavor transformed the grove of tall, slender firs that separate the western edge of her garden from the Sound. Boswell still shudders when he recalls the ordeal of shaping these trees to Mrs. Miller's liking: "I climbed up

into the trees while she stood in the library. I'd shake each branch and she'd give the thumbs up or thumbs down. The trees must be 70 feet high. It was a bit frightening, actually." Today these firs look like no

others you've ever seen around the Puget Sound: splayed, Whistleresque, as if they'd been storm sheared or petrified in a wild gale. Isolate them from the surrounding greenery and they could be the design for a Korean porcelain painting. Stamped for life by Mrs. Miller's iron will, the firs stop just short of tortured. *De trop*, perhaps, but you'll never look at that quintessential Northwestern image of a fir silhouette against water in the same way again.

Those who know Betty Miller's garden well speak of it with reverence, but what about its impact beyond her immediate circle? Did her garden help define or influence our current Northwest style of gardening? "Profoundly," insists Lorton. "First of all because she was tireless in finding and introducing new plants, in pestering nursery people to grow and sell them, and in promoting other people to grow what she loved. And second, because she had money, and like it or not, people

emulate the rich. Seeing her overgrown, densely planted thicket of a garden gave other people the courage to try a looser approach without worrying that it would look poor or untended or out of place."

There are plants of all sizes in the Miller garden, but her specialty was small plants, and small plants require a great deal of care, even when the proper microclimate has been coaxed up around them. The question looms: How much longer will Mrs. Miller's plants receive the care she insisted on during her lifetime? And beyond that an even larger question yawns: To what end is the garden being maintained? "Don't quote me on this," insisted one individual close to the garden, "but I find the whole thing really eerie. Recently there was a party at the Miller house, and everything was preserved just as Betty left it—her books open in the library, her furniture in place. What is the point of having such a big endowment going into this? Why are they hiring a director from New Jersey and striving to maintain the place in perpetuity? Unless the garden is really opened up to the public or made into a research center, it just seems like a tremendous ego trip."

Even with all her formidable powers of persuasion, Mrs. Miller was not able to convince the community she lived in to relax its rules and accord her garden some

sort of official recognition as a botanical institute. Now that she's gone, it seems unlikely that the neighbors will budge in her memory. "Of all the things Betty Miller could control, it's terrible that she didn't arrange the one thing she loved the most in a way that would have pleased her," says a friend. "She would have flipped had she known that the property wasn't open to the public." There is too much money tied up in the Miller estate for the garden to go on indefinitely as a sealed monument to its creator's good taste. And apparently there is too much opposition in the neighborhood to hope that the estate will be permitted to discreetly open its doors as a kind of North End Bloedel Reserve.

So the garden now grows under a shadow, its status unsettled, its policy toward visitors undefined, its future uncertain. The living tapestry that Betty Miller wove around the large clear windows of her house has become a kind of hostage or golden orphan, ensnared in a web of money and law and conflicting interests. How terrible that something so fine and good must submit in the end to something so ugly. ■

Seattle author and avid gardener David Laskin recently published 'Braving the Elements: The Stormy History of American Weather' (Doubleday).



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