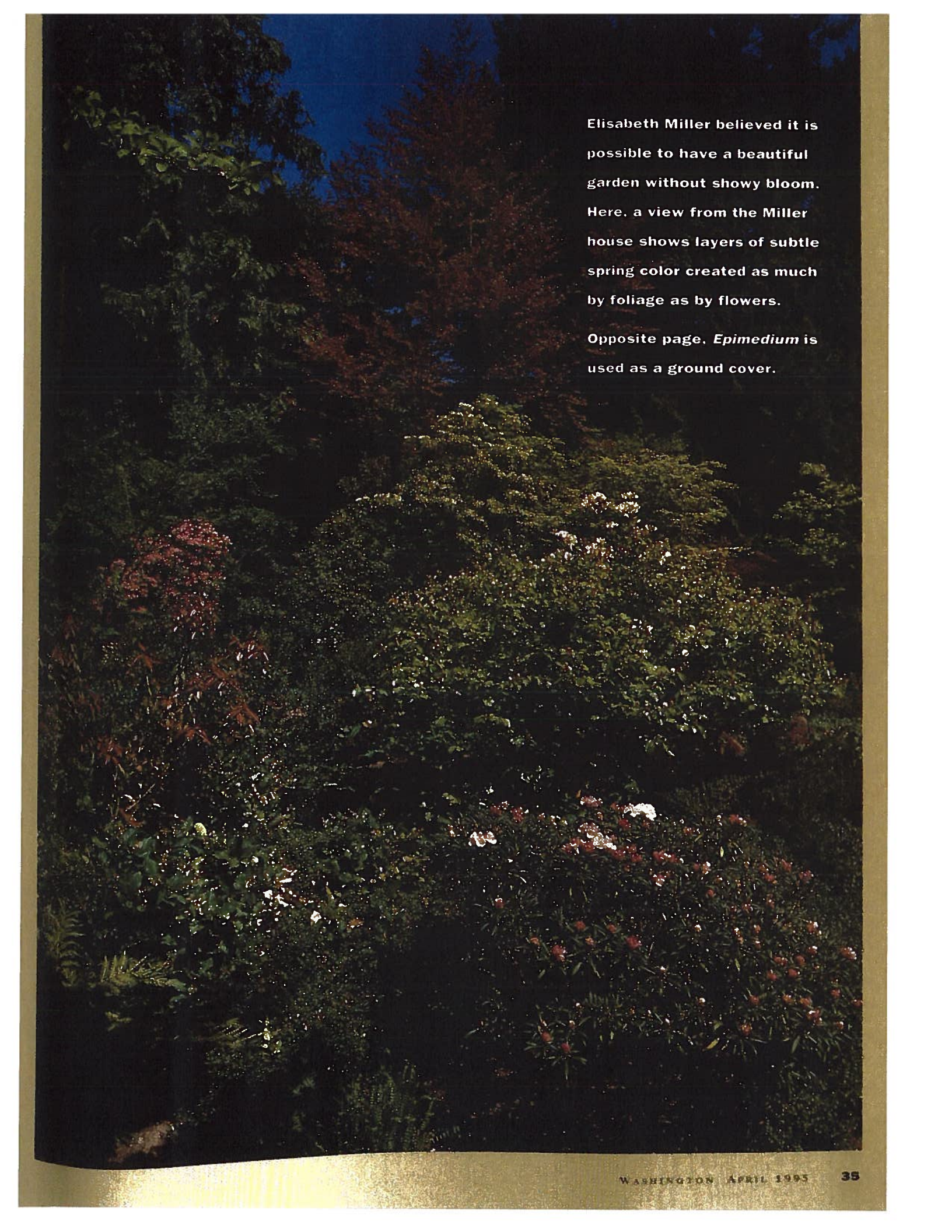


nativegarden

Northwest plants blend with rarities in a legendary Seattle garden

BY JAN KOWALCZEWSKI WHITNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY RANLETT

When Seattle civic activist Elisabeth Carey Miller died at age 79 in March 1994, she left a rich horticultural legacy. The plantings and public spaces along the Lake Washington Ship Canal, the traffic islands throughout Seattle, the Northwest Horticultural Society, University of Washington Center for Urban Horticulture, and Freeway Park in downtown Seattle — all are efforts that benefited from Miller's participation.



Elisabeth Miller believed it is possible to have a beautiful garden without showy bloom. Here, a view from the Miller house shows layers of subtle spring color created as much by foliage as by flowers.

Opposite page, *Epimedium* is used as a ground cover.

Gardening

A LESS VISIBLE BUT EQUALLY IMPORTANT part of her legacy is the four-acre personal garden she created in a secluded neighborhood overlooking Puget Sound. These legendary grounds have been visited by such influential designers as Rosemary Verey and Russell Page, as well as by members of national and regional gardening organizations.

The Miller garden is a treasure trove of rare plants, containing about 1,000 varieties from around the world. But it is also an artfully designed landscape.

Contoured on the ground by boulders and half-buried rotten logs and enclosed overhead by canopies of native evergreens, this garden is characterized throughout by purity of line, delicacy of color and texture, and a carefully calibrated visual flow between enclosure and openness, shade and sun, the dense and the airy. Intricate, eclectic, and yet with a wholly natural feel, the Miller garden seems to epitomize a particularly "Northwest" approach to landscape design.

A native of Montana, as a young woman Elisabeth Miller studied sculpture at the University of Washington. Her sensitivity to line, texture, and shape would inform her whole approach to gardening—as would her insistence, also reflected in her civic work, on building institutions of lasting visual appeal.

When Miller and her husband, lawyer Pendleton Miller, bought the Seattle

property in 1949, it featured Pacific Northwest woodland natives. Some of these were cleared away during construction of the house—a rambling, multi-winged stone and wood building that seems to grow naturally from the sloping hillside into which it is set.

Steve Balint, a landscape designer who worked in the Miller garden from 1957 until 1993, recalls that one of his first tasks was to bring in hand-picked native boulders, which he and his crew built into a rockery in the woodland slope above the house. Miller was always there on days the rock was placed—"and if you laid 100 rocks, she always had two or three that needed to be moved."

Although stones and boulders may have been introduced for their aesthetic value, Miller later used them to create microclimates all over the garden, as she increasingly realized how important it is to provide the right habitats for plants. Later, many rocks were completely buried in certain areas of the garden because they provided cool, moist root runs for the rare plants Miller was attempting to acclimatize to Northwest conditions.

Just as her house was built with natural

materials to blend with its surroundings, Miller wanted nothing in her garden to seem obtrusive or out of place. This yielded a lifelong affection for the naturally occurring, or "species," varieties of plants—as opposed to those bred by horticulturists, often for showy bloom.

Her first planting enthusiasm centered on species rhododendrons, whose growing requirements for moist acidic soil, filtered sunlight, and some



shelter already existed in the woodland area above her house. Many of these were secured directly from worldwide plant-hunting expeditions she helped to fund.

Because she received many of these rare rhododendrons with no cultural instructions attached, Miller had to find the right growing conditions by experimentation. In time, it became her standard practice to plant samples of each new plant in three differing habitats, so that she could assess which conditions made it thrive.

But Miller also did extensive research on each new plant acquired, recalls Richard Brown, who worked in the Miller garden for several years in the late '60s. She wanted to "understand its needs from the beginning."

Her colleagues remember that Miller discovered early on how crucial proper preparation is for growing healthy plants. "Mrs. Miller always wanted you to take the necessary steps to do the best possible job," says Michael Boswell, head gardener at the Miller garden. "If you had to take three hours to prepare to do a 15-minute project, she thought it was worth it."

Recalls Steve Balint, "We made our own soil mixtures for various parts of the garden. If we were planting a rhododendron, for instance, I would make up a mixture of leaf mold, rotted wood, coarse sand, and peat, then dig a hole three feet deep, even if the plant was so small it was in a gallon container. I'd spade in some crushed rock for good drainage, add some of the mixture, establish the plant, and then backfill."



Gardeners' Resource

The Miller library is open to all

"I wish I could get across to our gardeners that all needed, useful information is in the library," said Elisabeth Miller in an interview given shortly before her death.

Thus it's fitting that one of her many contributions to Washington horticulture was a library—the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, which celebrates its 10th anniversary in this year.

Located at the University of Washington Center for Urban Horticulture in Seattle, the Miller library is the foremost horticultural library in the Pacific Northwest. There is no other horticultural library of its size in this state.

Founded by Miller and her husband to serve the general gardening public, the library contains a large reference collection as well as a lending collection of about 800 books, videos, and journals. Periodicals, seed, bulb, and nursery catalogs, special collections of

old and rare books, and information on regional horticultural organizations also are on hand.

Miller librarians will answer gardening questions over the telephone; in 1994, they fielded more than 10,000 such questions from gardeners locally and around the nation. On Monday nights throughout the year, from 4-8 pm, the library hosts the Washington Garden Clinic, at which master gardeners and a plant taxonomist are available to answer gardeners' questions.

The Center for Urban Horticulture is located at 3501 NE 41st Street in Seattle (near the campus of the University of Washington). Library hours are Tuesday-Friday 9 am-5 pm, Monday 9 am-8 pm. The telephone number is (206) 543-0415. •



Simplicity is one of the hallmarks of the Miller garden. The house was built of natural materials such as cedar and designed so that it seems to have grown up in its garden spot. Below left, a path lined with mounded dwarf conifers (*Tsuga canadensis* 'Cole's Prostrate') leads to a door at the back of the house.

Species plants, not bred by horticulturalists, shine in this setting. Left, *Rosa glauca*, a species rose, offers bright flowers and striking foliage. Like many other species plants, it is relatively easy to care for.

Below, woodland plants make a charming groundcover. The fern in the foreground is *Polypodium scolieri*. The flowering plant is *Pyrola asarifolia*.



Gardening

Miller was ahead of her time in using native plants for their ornamental qualities, and in planting natives and exotics together. One of the remarkable features of her garden is how lustrous our humble Northwest forest ground covers look among the added exotic ferns, wildflowers, and shrubs.

Daniel Zatz, who has worked at the garden more than 10 years and became its director after Miller's death, says one of the reasons such familiar plants show well here is that they are pruned with as much care as are rare plants. The graceful arch of *Mahonia repens* branches, the curly spring of salal twigs, and the lacy swirls of huckleberry leaves stand fully revealed, having been pruned of excess vegetation. Sunlight filtering through the trees and shrubs bathes these ground covers in a reflected sheen.

As Miller became expert in combining native ground covers with exotics, she evolved a philosophy of companion planting. Richard Brown, now director of the Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island and current president of the Northwest Horticulture Society, explains Miller's philoso-

phy: "She had a strong tendency to let the plants mingle together, making no attempt to isolate them. She liked plants to grow together naturally so they protected one another from drought, sun, and wind."

When they first planted a garden area, he says, Miller might establish a few rare specimens, then create the right soil temperature and moisture for them by surrounding them with easily grown ground covers, such as *Heuchera cylindrica*. As the rare plants thrived and grew, she would replace the stalwart heucheras with new rare treasures.

In this sense, Miller never "finished" any part of the garden, which was always evolving as she discovered new plants and established them in previously created habitats. Yet in another sense everything she did was done to last, notes Daniel Zatz, who points out that Miller planned her garden with the thought of how it would look decades into the future. "She was very forward thinking. She always looked 20, 30, and 40 years ahead when she planned something, either for the garden or in her civic work." •



Miller favored pruning plants for an airy effect. Here, a *Rhododendron bureavii* is pruned so that someone standing at this window can look through it into the garden.



Elisabeth Miller and a gardener, the late Ken Gambrill, work with *Rubus tricolor*.

Lessons from the Miller Garden

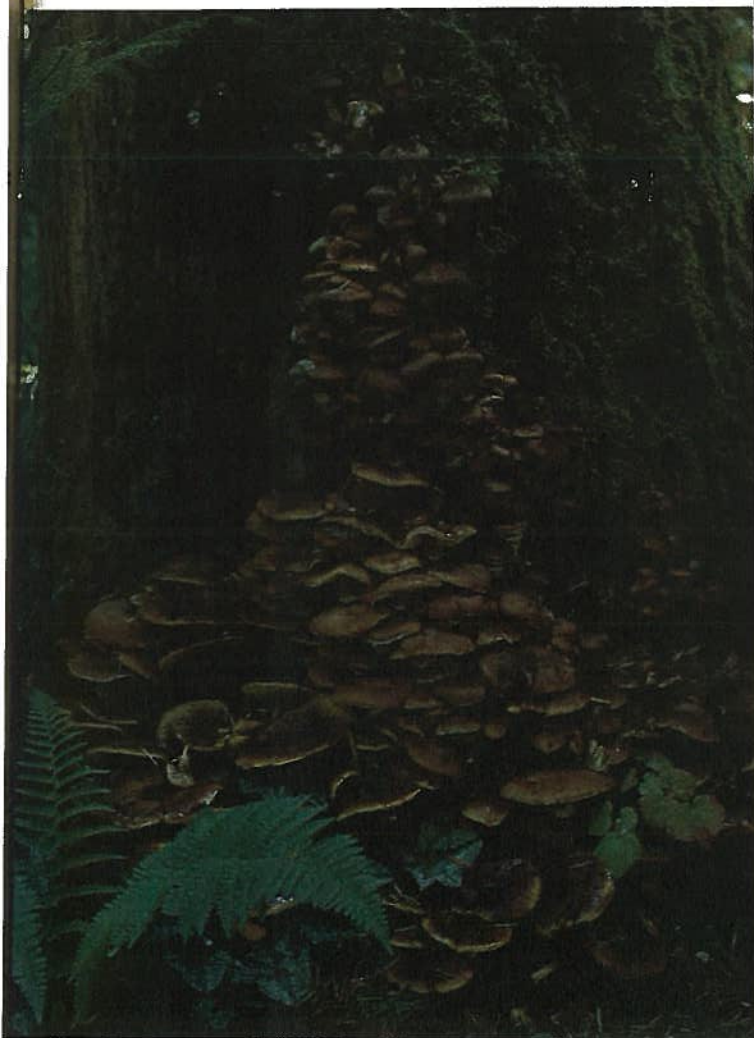
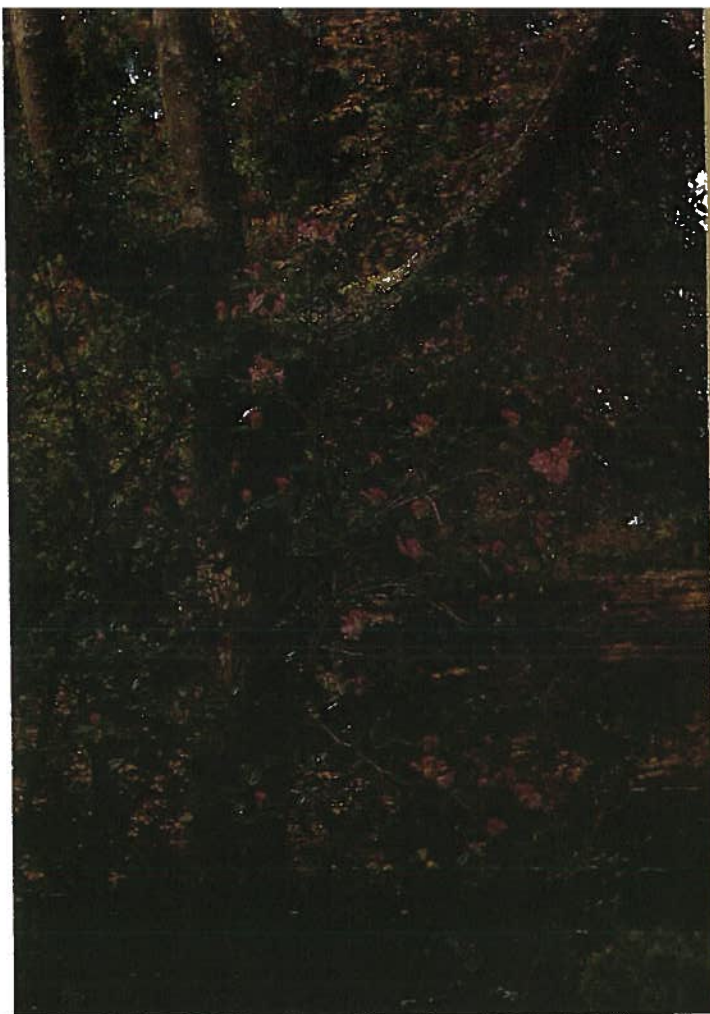
Elisabeth Miller relied on tremendous vision and personal energy, as well as a staff of professional gardeners, to help her garden come to life. But her colleagues insist that her approach to gardening can serve as a model for anyone. They offer the following suggestions for

creating your own beautiful Northwest garden, filled with thriving plants:

- Consult the needs of your plants foremost; learn everything you can about them before planting them, then provide them with the soil, water, protection, and feed-

ing they need.

- When selecting plants, look for pleasing lines and textures. Those qualities stay with a plant year-round, while color alters.
- Don't feel you must plant for showy bloom. Miller believed that all plants and structures in a garden should fit into a seamless visual tapestry.
- Select plants so that something interesting is happening in your garden year-round.
- Prune plants for health and aesthetic quality from the time they are introduced into the garden. Don't wait until you have problems later on.
- Prune to give plants an airy, loose effect. It is one of the great visual pleasures in a garden to look through the plants to further vistas.
- Use pesticides and herbicides as a last resort; a healthy, well-maintained garden seldom has serious disease or infestation problems.
- Cherish the wildlife in your garden. Miller put out plenty of water and birdseed and always planted enough fruit and berry-bearing plants for both humans and wildlife to enjoy. — JKW



In the Miller garden, gardening artistry creates a wholly natural look. Above, *Clematis macropetala* grows through the limbs of an oak, *Quercus glandulifera*. In the foreground, *Rhododendron callimorphum*.

Above left, groundcovers and other plants come together in lush profusion. The red-bloomed plant is *Rosa moyesii*, a species rose. The mounded plant in the middle foreground is a heather, *Calluna vulgaris* 'Foxii Nana.' A Northwest native fern, *Woodwardia fimbriata*, is seen growing through the leaves of a rhododendron.

A natural garden includes natural decay. Left, a rotting stump serves as a background for woodland plants and is also beneficial for wildlife.

All photographs used courtesy of the Miller garden.

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