

SPECIAL REPRINT

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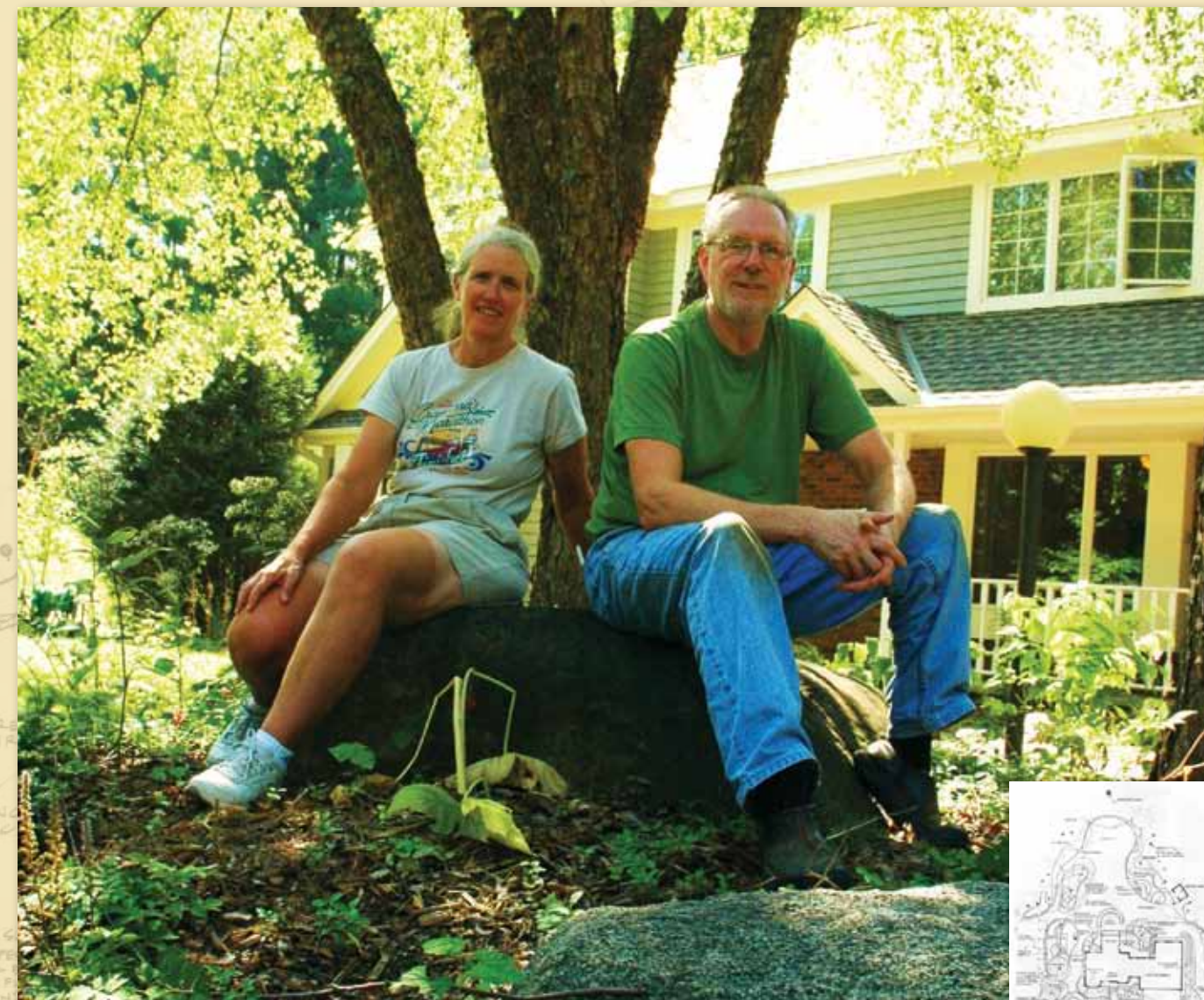
WOODLANDS & PRAIRIES

MAGAZINE

with Mrs. Woods

Bringing Nature Into a Landscape Plan

How home owners Roger Miller and Mary Zweber teamed with landscape architect Diane Hilscher to create a yard that is natural by design



Sitting pretty. Mary Zweber and Roger Miller enjoy their redesigned landscape that integrates native and non-native plants. Photo: Rollic Henkes



Natural by Design By Rollic Henkes

At first glance, you might think the highly structured design for this yard didn't have a place for free spirited native plants. Native plant communities lie at its heart, however.

Landscape architect and ecologist Diane Hilscher did the design for the

yard of Roger Miller and Mary Zweber in Stillwater, Minn.

Hilscher studied under Professor Darrel Morrison at the University of Wisconsin, a leader of the movement to integrate native ecosystems into landscape design. "Integrate" is a key word here. Hilscher's design wouldn't scare off the average home owner. "You lose people if your designs differ radically from what they're used to," says Hilscher, whose business, Hilscher De-

sign and Ecology, is based in the Twin Cities. "I work closely with my clients to create a landscape they really enjoy. I'm known for my experience designing with natives. If clients aren't familiar with natives, I nudge them toward including native plants in their landscapes."

Miller and Zweber didn't need much nudging, being self-professed nature lovers. And they did have a landscaping problem. The house that Miller



Integrator. Diane Hilscher checks out a woodland garden in the yard. "There's room for plants to move." Photo: Rollie Henkes

and Zweber bought in 2000 sat in a large-lot development in Stillwater northeast of St. Paul. The developer built the house in 1985 for his family, putting in traditional landscaping. Fifteen years later, Miller and Zweber were looking at overgrown foundation plantings; unhealthy view-blocking spruce trees, and nearly an acre of featureless lawn that shed storm water into an adjacent property.

The lot included 2 acres of a pine plantation surrounding the back yard and a side yard. Red and white pines grew on what historically had been an oak savanna, as testified to by a scattering of native hardwoods, including a lone bur oak. Settlers had cleared the savanna for cropping and grazing in the middle of the 19th century. That era ended when the farmer who ultimately sold the land to the developer planted thousands of pines under a government conservation program. The turn of the 21st century found Miller and Zweber with their 3 acres of that land, fighting buckthorn

in the woods and wondering how to renew the overgrown traditional landscaping they'd inherited.

They contacted Hilscher after seeing her ad in a regional gardening magazine. "She told us that native plants would attract more birds and butterflies. We liked that idea," Zweber says.

Miller adds, "Diane showed us how to transition to native plantings without starting over from scratch. She added gardens that allowed us to mix native and non-native species. The result is a blend of natural landscaping within the more-structured landscape, and we greatly reduced the size of our turfgrass lawn in the process."

Islands of diversity

"Their yard lends itself well to vignettes," Hilscher says. On pages 34-35 she describes the gardens that create spaces in the landscape with islands of diversity.



Hepatica.



Joe pye weed with great spangled fritillary.



Siberian iris and Canada anemone.

A transformative experience

The makeover under Hilscher's guidance has been as transformative for the homeowners as it has been for their yard. Especially for Miller. During one phase of the landscaping, Hilscher told Miller about a chapter of Wild Ones that was being formed in Stillwater. (Wild Ones is the national native plants, natural landscaping organization. www.wildones.org). "Would you be interested in joining?" she asked. Miller not only joined, he recently completed six years as a board member and program chair, during which time the membership of the young chapter has tripled. He's also become a Master Gardener, following classes offered through University of Minnesota Extension. His plant list for their yard has grown to 110 native species, and 140 non-native. The native plants are from nurseries that use locally harvested seed, assuring that the plants will be well adapted to the climate and attractive to local wildlife.

"Entomologists like Douglas Tallamy are among the strongest advocates for native plants," Miller says. "They recognize if we don't have native plants for insects to feed on, then there's nothing for the birds to eat, and so on. The whole food web begins to break down."

Dynamic

"The landscape plan might look highly designed with defined edges, but there's room for the plants to move,"

Hilscher says. "The edges will soften over time for a more natural look. I like gardens where everything isn't frozen in place. We might edit out some plants or move them to a better location as they spread, but if we like the results, we'll just let them be."

"Species like columbine, early meadow rue, wild geranium and heart-leaved aster are starting to pop up everywhere," Miller adds. "We can let them grow into something a little more spontaneous---go wilder if we like."

When magic happens

It hasn't happened overnight. "We began planning the first of our new gardens with Diane in the fall of 2002, and we've staged the renovation over a decade," Miller says. "Some of the first plant communities added to the yard are now beginning to mature and propagate. I like to quote Rick Darke, a prominent natural landscaping advocate, who talks about the point when native plant communities reach a critical mass. As Darke says, then 'magic happens.' The landscape begins to work as an ecosystem and takes on a life of its own. When you begin to see butterflies and birds that haven't frequented the area before, it adds a special layer of magic," Miller continues.

"That's what we're looking forward to in the next few years."

Islands of Diversity

1 Rain gardens in the front yard capture water off the roof and from the back of the lot. They replaced turfgrass in a swale where water would run off through a culvert under the street. The suites of wetland and wet mesic species include swamp milkweed, cardinal flower, prairie dropseed, blue flag iris, Canada anemone, harebells, pussy toes, heart leafed aster, and several sedge species.



2 The entry garden by the driveway features a rain garden on the lower level with wetland and wet mesic plants. On the upper level behind the retaining wall we have mesic and dry mesic plants such as showy golden rod, Joe Pye weed, liatrus, prairie dropseed and large-flowered penstemon. There are also several of Roger's non-native favorites such as spirea, lilacs, daffodils and peonies which provide an early-season welcome. The centerpiece is a Swiss Stone pine, also non-native.



3 A woodland garden underneath the mature river birch trees farther up the drive also welcomes visitors with species such as maidenhair fern, Solomon's seal, bishop's cap, early meadow rue, and hepatica. The plants grow where once there was only a river-rock mulch and a few cultivated shrubs.



4 Another woodland garden captures runoff from the front corner of the house through a drain tile and a pop-up valve. Growing underneath the shade of maples and a linden are wildflowers such as Virginia bluebells, large-flowered trillium and sharp-lobed hepatica, as well as bleeding heart, a non-native favorite. Framed by a picture window, this garden can be enjoyed year-around from inside the house. For winter interest, the garden includes winterberry, red-twig and Pagoda dogwood, White Shag white pine and other dwarf evergreen shrubs, amid several carefully placed boulders.



5 A side yard garden disguises the septic system and accents a slope up to the drain field with a retaining wall of local limestone. This side garden features prairie species such as purple coneflower, rigid goldenrod, Joe Pye weed, prairie dropseed grass, alum root and blue lobelia, along with a "cutting garden" of cultivated plants like Asian lilies, yellow foxglove, peonies and iris.



6 A patio garden off the back of the house, especially planted for butterflies, contains mums, salvia, coreopsis, a liatris cultivar, and perennial geraniums combined with native accents such as thimbleweed and clumps of June grass.



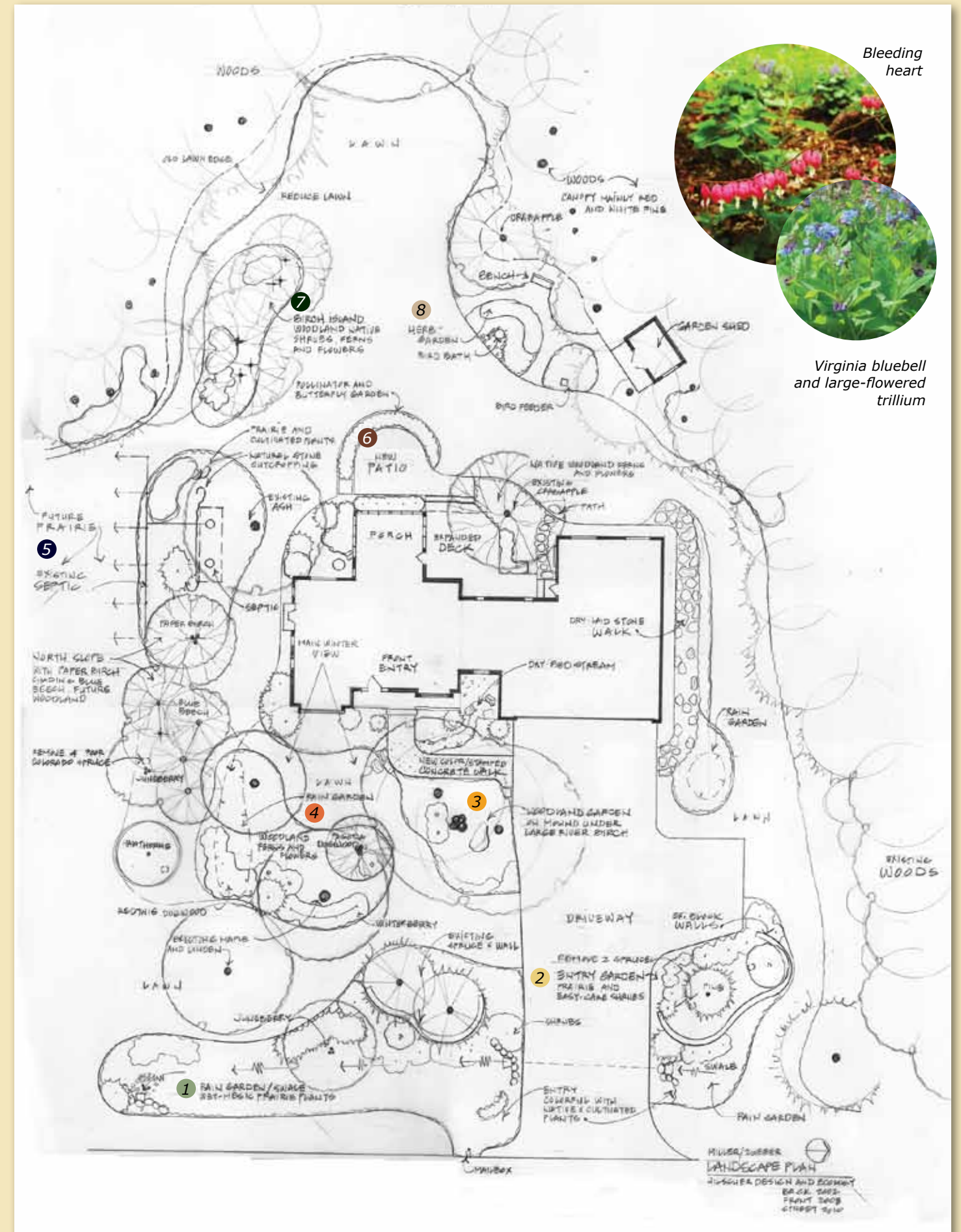
7 It's hard to find anything interesting to grow under mature pines, and so from the edge of the pines in the back yard we brought out an island of paper birch. The understory plantings are simple masses of lady and maidenhair ferns with cascading dwarf bush honeysuckle. Also growing here are native yellow violet, columbine, Pennsylvania sedge, sensitive fern, bishop's cap and Virginia bluebells. The island serves as a focal point for the back yard.



8 Tucked in front of the pines on the other side of the back yard is a herb garden, with a mature flowering crab and a bench serving as a backdrop. Avid cooks, Roger and Mary grow herbs here such as sage, thyme, chives and parsley. Pollinators love it.



Roger Miller and Mary Zueber,
13711- 47th Street Court North, Stillwater, MN 55082-1239 .
Diane Hilscher, Hilscher Design and Ecology,
hilscherdesign@comcast.net



Bleeding heart

Virginia bluebell and large-flowered trillium