

An Early Neighborhood Gardener: Anita M. Miller

By Anne Olivia Boyer

Every now and then a journalist stumbles upon some good luck, and a story arrives virtually on his or her doorstep, ready to be written. Such was my luck when Jay Farrell mentioned that his friend, an architectural historian named Peter Maxson, had discovered a February 1908, issue of *The Garden Magazine* which included a long article by Anita M. Miller. Ms. Miller was an avid gardener who lived on the property now bordered by Guadalupe and West Thirty-second Street. A widespread belief in the neighborhood has it that the Miller home on that property was moved down the block at some time, where its current address is now 702 West Thirty-second.

Anita Miller was the wife of Clarence Miller, who became Dean of the Law School and President of the Ex-Students Association at the University of Texas. The Millers were good friends with the sculptress Elizabeth Ney, and among the exhibits at the Ney Museum is a photograph of the Millers with Ney.

The editors of *The Garden Magazine* note, somewhat patronizingly, that Miller's article is something of a rarity for their publication, since they "do not print more Southern articles" because they "do not know how to get any as good as this."

Miller's article is indeed a gem, well-written, practical, and enthusiastic. She describes her land as originally "a virgin wilderness" from which they were obliged "to cut a path through prickly pear and mesquite brush from the front door to the street car track." Whenever her baby went outside with her Mexican nurse, "the little one returned with her frock all torn by brambles."

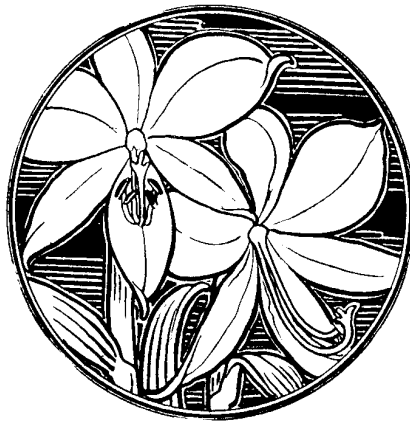
She and her husband were strong proponents of Bermuda grass, and encouraged its growth because of its ability to withstand drought. If you fall into the camp of neighborhood gardeners who regard Bermuda grass as a bane, you may have Anita Miller to blame for long hours spent weeding it out of your flower beds.

The Millers had a fence problem. They had tried living without a fence, but found it impracticable. "All sorts of people and animals, from cowboys on horseback to dogs and droves of turkeys, were apt to wander across the lawn and flower-beds at any moment," she recalls. She solved the problem by planting hedges of ligustrum, Chinese arbor vitae, pink hybrid Wichuriana roses, and Hall's honeysuckle.

The Millers prized their shade trees in this country "of almost perpetual sunshine," and their homestead was blessed with eight post oaks and twenty American elms, many of which

are now, alas, gone. Even then mistletoe and moss were familiar plagues, and had to be dealt with annually.

Reluctant to sacrifice even a single shade tree, the Millers nevertheless wanted to devote some of their land to an orchard. They settled on a space, just north of the house, and apparently had no trouble raising pears, peaches, plums, apples, Siberian crabapples, apricots, Japanese persimmons, and figs. The figs thrived especially well, and she mentions White Ischia, Celestial, Brunswick, and Magnolia, the White Ischia being her favorite, although she notes that the Celestial was the most popular. She advises against strawberries, because they require so much irrigation, and states flatly that cherries, raspberries, gooseberries, and currants fail utterly in our climate.



Ms. Miller remarks that in order to succeed in the Austin orchard one must constantly cultivate the surface of the soil and keep it free from weeds. "In large orchards it is customary to cultivate with a broad shallow orchard plow, but we have confined ourselves entirely to the man with a hoe." If this sounds primitive, let me assure you that I once saw a Mexican plowing—actually and effectively plowing—with his bare feet—simply and joyfully digging up the soil with his toes!" (Labor laws, obviously, were not all they should have been in those days.)

The Millers had tremendous luck with roses, which bloomed almost continually except in times of frost. Her garden offered a veritable palette of these popular flowers: white Kaiserin Augusta Victoria and The Bride; pink Caroline Testout and Bridesmaid; red Meteor, Reine Marie Henriette, and Baldwin; and yellow Marechal Niel. The sole enemy of roses in Austin was the hackberry tree, occasionally a beautiful shade tree but more often a menace because of its tendency to send out a fine mesh-work of surface roots which ruined flower beds.

Vegetables seemed to spring from the ground almost spontaneously under Ms. Miller's watchful eye. She boasts of a bountiful crop of lettuce, tomatoes, sweet corn, potatoes, beans, English peas, spinach, cucumbers, sweet peppers, eggplant, radishes, parsley, and muskmelons. These crops were watered by hose, using city water at thirty-three and a third cents a gallon, or roughly one twentieth of what we pay for water these days.

It would be pleasant to think of the vigorous Anita—who raised four children, led an active social life, cultivated an enormous garden, and found time to write—as enjoying to a ripe old age the paradise she had created in the Texas wilderness. Unfortunately, a shadow fell over the fortunes of the Millers, and in the same year Anita's gardening article was published Clarence Miller died at the premature age of forty-eight. How his