

Surfside gardener creates showplace yard on a shoestring

Miller is no stranger to successful gardening

By **LYNDA LAYNE**
Special to EO Media Group

SURFSIDE, Wash. — George Miller’s Surfside yard often stops traffic. He says he doesn’t understand what all the fuss is about. But one look at this spectacular colorful masterpiece can prompt even the most shy person to put on the brakes, roll down a window and ask, “How’d ‘ya do all this?”

Miller’s brown single-wide, with a name sign and flagpole in the front yard, is on 324th Place, on the road to Surfside’s compactor.

“Living here is like going back in time 50 years,” Miller explained. “People walk by, stop and talk, or they’ll stop their cars right in the middle of the street and visit. That’s the way we do it here. We’re on beach time.”

When questions start flying from onlookers, what they find out is wonderfully mind-boggling. Miller created this landscape on a shoestring, dividing plants each year, using varieties that reseed, making his own soil combination and cutting starts from geraniums, fuchsias and any other plants he can propagate.

Another surprise is the age factor. Miller will turn 80 this winter. Still, he maintains all this on his own and he rather shyly comments he has it under control, though he admits with a quiet laugh that as he gets older, “It takes longer to do things. I’ve slowed down a lot.”

Maintaining the beauty

All around Miller’s house there are flowers, plants and trees, but now that everything is established, he has maintenance down to a science.

“It’s work in the spring, because I’m out there on my hands and knees, getting all the weeds out, and in the fall, I’m out here cleaning everything up,” he explained. In those fall weeks, he amends soil, cuts plants back and transfers some into what he calls his garden house. But right now, in the summer months when everything seems to be blooming at full burst, he can just sit on his porch with a cup of coffee and enjoy the view.

Hanging baskets and containers are a big part of Miller’s landscape and they’re the only thing he has to regularly maintain in the summer months. There are fuchsias, petunias and other colorful plants. “This time of year, I have to water them almost every day,” he said. “It’s the wind that dries them out. The ones I have hanging in the front have wires to keep the wind from whipping them around. They’re tied down.”

Garden beauty on a budget

Miller lives on Social Security and finds ways to garden with little monetary output.

“Plants are getting so expensive anymore, I can’t afford to buy them,” he said. But speaking of some of his colorful annual plants, he added, “I do buy some petunias and impatiens every year. But all my geraniums and fuchsias that are in hanging baskets, they all go into my garden house for winter. I cut fuchsias back to the pot edge,” he explained.

His geraniums, on the other hand, don’t get cut back until early spring, but do share the garden house in the winter with other plants. He keeps a light on the plants for winter and waters them lightly. Even though they’re dormant for those months, “You don’t want them to go completely dry.”



Lynda Lane/Submitted Photos

Miller checks a hanging basket full of petunias on the west side of his home. While he does buy a few such annuals each spring, almost all of his garden has been established by dividing plants each year and keeping varieties that reseed themselves. He originally started with just three daisy plants and through dividing them each year, he now has them “all over the place.”

Not just flowers

This year, Miller planted several squash plants from seed, another money saving plan. He also has potatoes growing near them, on the west side of his house. But the big project growing now in his garden house are tomatoes, which are in containers set in heated water trays. Most of the tomato plants are Romas. “Also, I have some larger ones that I haven’t tried before” he said.

With these homegrown tomatoes, he makes tomato sauce. “I use it to make my spaghetti and chili,” he said. And making chili is a serious venture. “I’ve won first, second and third place in the chili contest we have here in Surfside,” he said. These tomatoes are what he calls his “secret ingredient” to this success.

Garden house:

For many seasons and reasons

Roughly 8 by 10 feet, Miller said his current garden house used to be a laundry room “for the people who lived here before.” It had no windows, so part of the conversion that Miller did was add a lot of glass. “I got the windows for free from the compactor,” he explained, adding that, “This is the best thing I ever did. I use this a lot. I can do my potting in the spring in here.” And of course, he grows his treasured tomatoes inside and winters over many of his other plants.

Magical transformation

Glassing in the garden house wasn’t the only transformation done by Miller when he bought this place 12 years ago. “When I came here, there were three rhododendrons and dead grass. Weeds had grown over all the gravel in the driveway. And the house was yellow.”

His original intent was to “just have a little porch and a couple of potted plants and I could sit there and contemplate my life that has passed by.” But each time he sat and looked, he realized what could be. He painted the house brown and in the front, built a trellis and planted clematis that has now thickly spread up and over.

“The clematis is a spectacular feature in the spring,” he said. “Everybody just raves about it.”

He dug out all the weeds from the driveway and put in a border on each side with

white-painted two-by-fours. And then came what his calls the perennial bed, along one side of the driveway. “All the things in here come up year after year. It’s kind of like a cycle. When spring first comes, primroses come up and they get big old-fashioned clusters of yellow flowers. They’re spectacular. The poppies reseed themselves, so keep coming up.” He also planted trees, which give him a screen from neighbors. The huge daisies are really blooming now and the dahlias are bright. He started out with just three daisy plants and a few dahlias and by taking advantage of dividing, now has these “all over the place.”

Walking around his yard, he commented on a number of plants, including sedums. “They get a beautiful lavender color,” he said. And there are also tall elegant tiger lily flowers. The variety is endless.

Compost bins

Every weed he pulled, the clippings from edging new borders and any pruning and clipping pieces went right into the two sets of double compost bins he has behind his house. In the fall, when he has big pieces from pruning, he burns them and then puts the resulting ash in the bins. “I have made my soil, because I compost everything,” he explained, adding that sand mixed with all these organic ingredients really helps to produce a fluffy, clean soil mix.

Skills recognized

Soon, Miller’s gardening skills were being recognized by many people in Surfside. And he became involved with the community. “I’m secretary of the board,” he said. “So I started getting involved at our cabana down here by the lake. It was run down.” He designed the landscaping for that area. The county brought him 10 truckloads of fill dirt they were removing from another place. “We made a berm. And then we had a community garage sale and raised a couple thousand dollars to buy plants. This is about 10 years ago. And then someone said, George, you did such a nice job there, can you figure out something for down at the 306th for the bridge, Veteran’s Park, so I designed that, too. And I ended up doing a couple other cabanas, doing the landscaping for those, too.”



Tall daisies flank a fountain that Miller has owned for about 30 years. Crows sometimes land there to soak their food in water.

It didn’t stop there, Miller said, “Two years ago, at the end of the lake over here, me and a couple of my friends, we call ourselves The Old Guys, got in there and started cutting the brush and stuff, because that belongs to Surfside. We took all of the brush out of there. Cleaned it up. The community relations committee donated the bench and I made a little sign that says Deer Lake with stick-on letters. In my blog — I’m famous for my blog — I put on there about that cleanup and sign and I got an email from a guy that lives in California who wants to stay anonymous. He said, ‘I’m sending you something UPS.’ About two weeks ago, it came. It was a carved sign that says Deer Lake on it.”

Sixty-five years of gardening

Miller didn’t learn his gardening and design skills overnight. It all started when he was a teen. “I grew up in Camas and when I was a kid there, I was a member of the Camas-Washougal Garden Club. I was about 15 years old. They told me I was the youngest member they’d ever had. So, I’ve been doing this for a long time.”

Throughout his life, he has gardened, a skill very much recognized by his wife, Joyce. They were married for 35 years and 21 years ago, he lost her to cancer. At the back of his Surfside property is a memorial to her, which he brought with him from where they lived in Clark County. “We were out in the Yacolt area. We lived in the mountains. I had 3 1/2 acres. If you think this place is something, you should have seen that. I had such a park there and I opened it to the public to come in. Up in the woods on a little hill there, I built a covered memorial, like a gazebo. I had this memorial (plaque) and lights and a bench. I had a guest book for people to sign. I had a sign out on the road, open to the public. I had a pond built. People would come in and walk around. I had 50 rhododendron plants. People would tour the grounds and then sign in.”

He recalls all “the nice things people said,” when they signed the guest book. But perhaps, for Joyce, what he says often now is the biggest gift of all. “My wife was the most wonderful woman in the world. When I lost her to cancer, it very nearly killed me,” he said.



9-1-WHAT?
THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

Donkey on the highway

We’re not much into conspiracy theories, like that orange-hued presidential candidate, but the election might be making some people twitchy.

Consider these calls to 911: “Five juveniles taking political signs out of yards and hitting them against trees and bushes. #Astoria”

- “Man sitting in a stroller, hollering. Caller is concerned he stole the stroller. #Astoria”

- “Donkey on the highway. #Astoria”

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT.



9-1-WHAT?
@9_1_WHAT

Following

{8/3 @ 12:39 p.m.} Donkey on the highway.
#Astoria

10:51 AM - 8 Aug 2016





9-1-WHAT?
@9_1_WHAT

Following

{8/6 @ 2:52 p.m.} Caller reported someone being aggressive with her while taking cans from recycling. #Seaside

10:54 AM - 8 Aug 2016





9-1-WHAT?
@9_1_WHAT

Following

{8/7 @ 7:14 p.m.} Report of someone shooting off illegal fireworks and guns while intoxicated. #Seaside

10:58 AM - 8 Aug 2016





9-1-WHAT?
@9_1_WHAT

Following

{8/8 @ 5:39 p.m.} Five juveniles taking political signs out of yards and hitting them against trees and bushes. #Astoria

LINE 1





9-1-WHAT?
@9_1_WHAT

Following

{8/8 @ 1:05 p.m.} Man sitting in a stroller, hollering. Caller is concerned he stole the stroller. #Astoria

LINE 1



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