

Our Garden of Weedin' ...I mean Eden

By Linda Pinkham

*M*y husband Bill and I hosted the Hardy Plant Society this spring for a tour of our garden on three acres overlooking the James River in Virginia. I always tell everyone I am the Head Weeder and Bill is the Master—Master Planner that is.

We met in college in the '60s at Virginia Tech in the Department of Horticulture. After we graduated and Bill did his stint in the US Navy, we started a landscape/garden center business, where I ran the retail operation, and Bill ran the design-build landscape operation. It was a good background for developing our own garden.

We experienced many plant trends, always looking for new plants. As the new century began, more and more new plants were showing up everywhere. How exciting! We wanted them all. We wanted to plant them in our yard, but we didn't have time. You know...the cobbler's children.



We had to retire so we could create our own garden. Bill had started the garden layout in the late '90s, bringing in his landscape crews to lay out the beds, bring in the soil mix, place rocks (boulders), etc. The crews were busy with other jobs except for a couple of weeks each January and August, so it was a slow start.

We stopped working in 2002 and started collecting and planting our own garden in earnest. It seems our driveway has never been empty since. That is where all the new plants go until they get planted.

I remember well when Bill told me he was going to put in a pond which was to be a "walk across event", inspired by a visit to the Heian Shrine in Kyoto, Japan. He asked if it would be OK to remove the steps to our front door. I said it would be fine as long as we could use the front door for Thanksgiving when our relatives were coming. Three years later...we had a front door entrance pond.

Recently, a new dry bog has been added on the north side of the house. This was a challenge

because we could not do it in the usual fashion with a recirculating filter system. Our entry pond with steps across it was built like a swimming pool and could not have a biological filter and waterfall added. The new bog is lower than the pond, built of landscape blocks with a rubber liner and two pumps. The bog is 15" deep, filled with 1" rounded gravel underwater; the top 3" the same gravel but always dry, allowing all sorts of plants to grow and take the nutrients out of the water. With the help of a UV light, we now have clear water in our pond so we can see our beautiful koi.



One more piece to the puzzle is an automatic generator that keeps all the pumps running when the power goes out, a real problem in the past, resulting in a huge fish kill at one time.



How Bill Designs

Bill likes flowing curves, rocks, Japanese maples, and variegated and chartreuse colored foliage.

He likes for his bed lines to stay the way he laid them out, so he uses Ryerson's steel edging to edge the beds. One of the most important aspects of garden design is sharp distinct lines, particularly where the grass meets the beds. He likes soft curvilinear lines, sculptural in nature. He uses a flexible hose to lay out the lines. This allows for visualizing



different scenarios, tweaking them before cutting them out with a spade and inserting and backfilling the steel edging.

Bill always made raised beds 4–6" high when landscaping in this area, as the soil tends to be heavy clay. He found that plants performed better when he used a mixture of 1/3 topsoil, 1/3 compost, and 1/3 grit. He uses an expanded slate product called PermaTill for the grit. In certain situations, he will mound the beds to be higher than 6" in some spots.

Because Bill loves rocks so much, our garden has many areas where rocks are prominent features. One area consists of smooth limestone rocks. Another area has basaltic crystals in vertical sculptural forms with some being carved out as birdbaths.

Tropicals

The new USDA zone map says we are in Zone 8a. We still say 7b. We can grow Needle, Windmill, and *Sabal minor* palms with no problem, along with other plants that have a tropical appearance. Our greenhouse allows us to plant many other tropicals outdoors to enjoy from May to October. This area looks terrific in August and September when other areas are fading.

A new generator created an opportunity to enhance our "tropics." At a number of contemporary homes in Florida, we have fallen in love with the brightly colored stucco walls. We decided to build one to partially hide the generator. We tiled one side with 8" travertine tiles, where orchids and bromeliads hang in the summer. The other side is painted and serves as a backdrop for a sculpture acquired in Key West. An ipê lattice panel completes the project, hiding the electrical meters and displaying some of Bill's glass pieces.

Being plant collectors, we also want and enjoy plants year round. We are fortunate to live in a climate that allows us to do that.



I spend most of my garden time on my knees. We have the duties divided for the most part. Bill plans, plants, and waters. I weed and weed. My motto: NEVER let your weeds go to seed. I police the beds constantly looking for evil weeds. If a weed has a seed, a bulb, or something else that will reproduce in the compost pile, it

A Few of our Favorites

Climbing roses, hybridized by Bill Radler of Knockout® Rose fame. We have six different ones and the red Winners Circle™ is our favorite.

Cyclamen coum—blooms in February and for a very long time.

Cercis canadensis var. *texensis* 'Traveller' Weeping Redbud—beautiful shape; blooms a bonus

Liriope muscari 'Pee Dee Ingot'—great chartreuse color year round

Alstroemeria 'Casablanca'—white cut flowers all summer

Agave ovatifolia—beautiful form; silvery color

Camellia x *williamsii* 'Donation'—one of the heaviest bloomers in our garden; showy for a long time

Hydrangea macrophylla 'Fuji Waterfall'—unusual weepy bloom; reblooms in fall

Hydrangea quercifolia 'Snowflake'—WOW; long gorgeous trusses

goes in the evil weed trash bag and to the dump.

I'm a big believer that you should know the enemy well and call all your weeds by name. This helps keep the weeds under control.

Each year we clean up our beds December–February. We apply fertilizer and a preemergent herbicide to the beds in March and mulch over top of that. This really helps keep the weeds under control until the weather warms up and the spring rains encourage all those summer weeds to sprout. That's when I start my hand weeding in earnest. If the weeds are in the open, I spray them with Roundup®.

The mulch we use is shredded hardwood. We find that it does not float away like pine bark tends to, especially on slopes.

When planting new plants, we fertilize with a slow release Osmocote® and water the plants in well with Fertilome® Root Stimulator. After they are established, we fertilize once a year with Espoma Plant-tone® just to keep them healthy. Things grow so fast in our climate we don't want to push them, unless they are heavy feeders, like daylilies.

We are putting in a new daylily bed with steel edging adjacent to the



existing one, along the back of the house. Although we like mixing all different kinds of plants together, we have found that it has made sense to keep the daylilies somewhat segregated. This is more convenient for breeding work, special care needs, and water requirements.

Many new pots have been added to the garden. We prefer low bowls up to 3' in diameter. These are great to showcase specimen plants such as a golden weeping European Beech, weeping Mimosa, top-grafted weeping golden Fernspray False Cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Filicoides'), or standard *Microbiota decussata*. They are also excellent for dwarf conifer collections and cactus/succulent collections. This does make for additional hand watering, a minimum of one hour per day, but we find it quite rewarding and satisfying. We have a number of hosta in bowls, which protects them from vole damage. We also have had success



with all of the new heucheras. We were losing them in the ground, but they survive quite well in containers.

Some visitors leave our piece of paradise scratching their heads as to why anyone would want such a garden as ours. Although they love the beauty of it, they can't stop seeing the amount of work and money it takes to keep it maintained. But we made a commitment when we retired and we love it and don't look back.



Linda Pinkham never met a flower she didn't like. She is Horticulture Chair of the Elizabeth River Garden Club in Portsmouth, President of the Tidewater Daylily Society, and co-chair of their annual Flower Show. After five years as Extension Agent in Tidewater and thirty years as co-owner with her husband Bill of Smithfield Gardens, garden center and landscaping firm in Suffolk, VA, she now gardens with Bill on six acres on the James River in Carrollton, VA, (Zone 7B). Together, they have planted a collection of conifers, ornamental shrubs and trees, daylilies, reblooming iris, hostas, tree peonies, herbs, and no-spray roses. The one acre of plantings takes all her time to maintain.

Ed Note: All pictures ©Bill Pickham. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.

