Using color as their guide and enchantment as their goal, a gardener and a nurseryman tamed a wild hillside with a sophisticated combination of perennials and flowering shrubs.
In 1984 Nancy Miller asked Aerin Moore, a nurseryman and landscape contractor, to plant some flowers around her fish pond in the backyard. She was planning a tea for one of her granddaughters and wanted to liven up the patio area with a little bit of color. "Just a bit," Miller said. She had no intention of creating a flower garden.

Not that she didn’t love flowers, but after battling the “horrible clay soil” of her 4-acre Northern California property, she’d contented herself with taming a small strip around the house with ground covers and low-maintenance shrubs and with a few raised beds of vegetables. On the slope above the fish pond, a tall privet hedge screened a croquet court and play area used by visiting grandchildren, but the rest of the property was an undulating hillside covered by a tangle of poison-oak and blackberry bushes, shaded by native coast live oaks.

When Moore arrived to discuss the patio planting, he and Miller immediately discovered remarkable similarities in their gardening tastes: Both loved English gardens of pink and blue-flowered perennials, classical architecture, and natural stonework. She was impressed by his horticultural knowledge and liked his ideas for the pond-side planting.

Toward the end of their conversation, he revitalized her interest in flower gardening simply by glancing up the slope and saying, “Sometimes I’d like to do something up there.”

Roses (Rosa species) are staple flowering shrubs in the garden. In the foreground ‘Nearly Wild’ blooms white and pink; in the back, ‘Iceberg’ is pure white; hot pink ‘Betty Prior’ blooms on the right.

Do something he did. Delighted by his work around the fish pond and inspired by his ideas for expanding the garden, Miller gave Moore what amounted, in the end, to carte blanche to fill the property with flowers. In the beginning, he and his crew started small, installing a few perennial borders around the play area, which they replaced with a new sod lawn. They added yards of mulch to loosen the clay soil, and they filled the borders with a wonderful composition of pink and blue perennials.

Few flowers are true-blue, but the speedwell Veronica latifolia ‘Crater Lake Blue’ comes close, forming dense tussocks covered with spikes of tiny flowers. Bethlehem-sage (Pulmonaria saccharata ‘Mrs. Moon’) is attractive in leaf and in bloom: The leaves are spotted with yellow, and the pink buds open into blue trumpets. Twinspur (Diascia barbara) has narrow, toothed leaves and bears dense spikes of rose-pink flowers. Primula japonica, from the candelabra class of primroses, (named for the erect, 2- to 3-foot stems of flowers) bears magenta and white blooms from May to July. The dark lilac-pink flowers of obedience plant (Physostegia virginiana ‘Vivid’) extend the blooming season with blossoms that appear in September. Another fall bloomer, sage (Salvia guaranitica), bears spikes of deep royal blue flowers.

To highlight the beds, Moore planted the fiery astilbe (Astilbe ‘Fanal’) and a deep-red abutilon (Abutilon ‘Nabob’). Several roses and camellias add substance to the planting. ‘Iceberg’, a floribunda rose later planted throughout the garden as a unifying element, is pure white.

‘Miss All American Beauty’, an old garden rose, and Camellia sasanqua ‘Shishi-Gashira’ are magenta. The soft gray foliage of lamb’s-ears (Stachys byzantina ‘Silver Carpet’) and lavender-cotton (Santolina chamaecyparissus) brighten the pastel tints and enhance the glow of the magentas.
No Sooner Said Than Done

Miller was particularly impressed by Moore's quick work. He seemed to anticipate her wishes. One day she mentioned that the privet hedge blocked her view of the lovely new flower beds; the next day it was gone. The path leading to the beds was too muddy; in a flash it was paved in gravel with steps made of oak branches. An ivy-filled border along the patio looked drab to her one morning; by that afternoon it contained an exquisite red-barked Japanese maple (Acer palmatum ‘Sango-kaku’) surrounded by clear blue creeping forget-me-not (Omphalodes cappadocica) and pink and white lenten-rose (Helleborus orientalis), ferns, and impatiens.

For the next three years, the garden swept up the slope, propelled by Miller's and Moore's enthusiasm. They looked at plants in his nursery, studied the pictures in books, and to Miller their conversations seemed to turn into flowers that spread across the hillside. "We never stopped to draw up any plans," she says. "If we had, it wouldn't have turned out like this."

Color Harmony

In the Miller garden, color is everything. Miller and Moore strove to create a relaxed feeling with a pleasing balance of color. They achieved this harmony by choosing flowers with blue-based colors, a palette containing crimson, pink, violet, blue, and blue-green. This scheme is based on a tried and true principle of color theory. If a color wheel is divided along an axis bisecting equally the red and green segments, with one side containing blue-based colors and the other side composed of colors based on yellow, flowers chosen exclusively from either side will harmonize.

For the first two years, they explored blue-based colors, experimenting with combinations composed mainly of pinks and blues. Clumps of Siberian and Japanese irises (Iris sibirica and I. ensata) fill a border backed by a mass of pink roses. 'Nearly Wild' unfurls its light pink flowers above the electric blue blossoms of the Siberian iris 'Blue Jay'. Like most of the roses in the garden, 'Nearly Wild' is a single—its flowers have a single row of petals. 'Betty Prior', another single rose, is darker pink. A lone blue spruce (Picea pungens 'Koster') adds a complementary

Top: Japanese iris (Iris ensata), left, and Siberian iris (Iris sibirica 'Blue Jay'), right, are combined with the pink shrub rose 'Carefree Beauty' in one of the first areas planted.
Bottom: In the same area, hot pink 'Betty Prior' and pink and white 'Nearly Wild' roses continue the theme. White rose 'Iceberg' softens the intense colors, softening the overall effect.
tone of gray-blue, but its pyramidal form and furry texture stand out dramatically against the rounded, leafy shrubs. In the background, the white markings on the pink flowers of weigela (Weigela florida 'Variegata') are accentuated by the clear white flowers of a nearby 'Iceberg' rose.

In another group of blue-based flowers, Miller and Moore achieved a serene balance of hues with flax-lily (Dianella tasmanica), a sword-leaved plant with loose clusters of pale blue flowers followed by bright blue berries; violet penstemon (Penstemon 'Sour Grapes'); and shell pink cranesbill (Geranium sanguineum var. prostratum). Fuchsia thymifolia, a species resistant to the devastating fuchsia mite, is covered with drooping pink flowers for most of the summer, and the twigs and leaves are attractively tinged with red.

As they planted their way up the hill, Miller began to explore the other side of the color wheel, the oranges and yellows. According to the traditional rules of color combination, blue-based colors should be separated from yellow-based colors to avoid clashes, but Miller learned to blend one group effectively into the other. She found that the soft, yellow-variegated foliage of Carex morrowii 'Everbright', a grasslike sedge, is compatible with lavender-pink foxglove (Digitalis × mertensia) and purple Spanish lavender (Lavandula stoechas). Geranium × cantabrigiense 'Biokovo', a soft pink cultivar of cranesbill, echoes the pastel hues from farther down the slope. Blues are added to the scheme with blue sage (Salvia azurea var. grandiflora) and speedwell (Veronica latifolia 'Crater Lake Blue'). Rosa 'Mutabilis', a shrubby old garden rose, ties these variously colored flowers together with its multicolored blossoms. Its single flowers open peach, fade through several shades of pink, and mature to magenta. The peach flowers tie in with nearby orange and peach lilies (Lilium hybrids), the pinks touch on tints occurring throughout the garden, and the magenta blossoms contain enough blue to link them with the blue sage and veronica.
Top: More pinks and blues: pink and white cultivars of hardy orchid (Bletilla striata) mix well with lavender-pink cranesbill (Geranium × bericum). In the background are roses, including peach-flowering 'Just Joey', white-blooming 'Iceberg', and red-blossomed 'Fragrant Cloud'. Bottom left: Pink-flowered cranesbill (Geranium × bericum). Bottom right: Purple-flowered cranesbill (Geranium endressii).

The top of the rise is crowned with roses: the brilliant coral pink 'Fragrant Cloud' and the peach 'Just Joey'. Miller's favorite, 'Voodoo', is a free-blooming, disease-resistant cultivar. The coral flowers have a touch of yellow at the base of the petals, making the blossoms appear to glow from within.

On the other side of the garden, they removed the periwinkle from the slope above the swimming pool and planted more brightly colored roses. The intense, coral pink blossoms of 'America', a large-flowered climber, are striking above the turquoise-blue water. 'Rocky', a shrub rose, has clear orange double flowers. Another climber, 'Fred Loads', has orange flowers, but with a single row of petals. The climber 'Joseph's Coat' bears yellow-orange double flowers. The luminous hues of these roses appear to surge across the garden toward the viewer, defining the garden boundaries and creating a sense of enclosure and security. This effect worked so well that Moore and Miller later planted a slope along the back fence with an assortment of large shrub roses bearing bright crimson, pink, and white flowers.

The top of the promontory offers a sweeping view of the upper portion of the garden.
The remaining unplanted area was a flat, boggy patch of wild sedges. Miller and Moore’s plan for this area included a gazebo and open expanse of lawn, excavated in the wettest spot to form a pool of koi and water lilies (*Nymphaea* species). But when the bulldozer arrived, they decided to add another pool. Now two irregularly shaped pools grace the center of the lawn, filled in summer with the blossoms of water lilies. *Iris laevigata* ‘Alba’ bears stately white flowers from partially sunken rhizomes. The blooms of cardinal-flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and the leaves of New Zealand-flax (*Phormium tenax* ‘Dazzler’) accent the pools with brilliant reds.

**No Small Task**

This garden is not in any way a typical neighborhood garden. Moore’s crews worked full-time for nearly two years and part-time for another two. Seven oaks fell to admit more light, and the remaining oaks were thinned. Seventeen tons of flagstone were laid in place for the paths. The beds were terraced with dry stone retaining walls; by the end of the project, over 300 tons of stone had been set in the garden. Bulldozers were driven into the garden to grade the slopes and to carry the crane used to lower a pair of lion statues into place at the entrance to the uppermost lawn.

The plantings are rich with diversity; over nineteen hundred species and hybrids can be found in the garden. To bring water to all these plants, Miller and Moore installed an automatic irrigation system with over six hundred sprinkler heads. When it became apparent that their water allotment was insufficient, they built a 10,000-gallon redwood tank, connected to the sprinklers by a powerful pump. Water is added to the tank from a truck once or twice a week during the summer. To catch the water that runs off the slopes during winter storms, they dammed a small ravine.
Keeping It All Growing

Nancy Miller used to play golf three times a week, and traveled as much as possible, but now she'd rather be in her garden. She spends some of each day gardening, and she and her husband now take their vacation in February so they don't miss a minute of the garden's spring display.

Most of Miller's gardening efforts are devoted to maintaining and adjusting the extensive sprinkler system. "I love the plumbing," she says. "I love to adjust all the sprinklers." Her gardening toolbox contains pipe wrenches, fittings, sprinkler heads and risers, glue, and sealing tape. She feeds the plants once a month with liquid plant food dispensed by a hose-end sprayer. She employs a maintenance crew to care for the lawns, but entrusts the pruning, weeding, and grooming tasks to a gardener who helps her twice a week.

The heavy work—lifting, dividing, and moving plants—is accomplished by Moore and his landscaping crew. In fall, midwinter, and spring, they mulch the garden, spreading a total of 25 yards of mulch in the beds each year. They use an enriched, commercially prepared mulch, supplemented with compost from the garden.

After years of intensive construction and planting, most of the garden is finished, but the design continues to evolve. Many perennials are easily moved, and Miller and Moore rearrange plants each winter to improve the design and experiment with new combinations. They use small flags to mark the herbaceous perennials they plan to move; without the flags, it would be difficult to find the plants in the winter when they have no leaves. In some cases, Miller and Moore have had to move plants that rapidly outgrow their spaces. The phenomenal growth of the new plants amazes Moore, and he attributes it to the generous mulchings.

Such a spectacular garden doesn't go unnoticed. Wildlife discovered the flowers first: At night Nancy Miller sees the glowing eyes of deer peering longingly at the succulent growth through the Cyclone fence. In summer, the garden is filled with the thrum of hummingbirds, attracted by abutilon, salvias, and penstemons. As word of the creation spread, the garden filled with another sound, the appreciative oohs and aahs of visiting members of local garden clubs, marveling at Miller and Moore's enchanting compositions of color.

The Flower Framework

A flower border at its peak is a medley of colors and textures that seems to be composed of nothing but leaves, blossoms, and stems. What often doesn't show is an underlying framework, a structure of sticks, wire, or string used to support the tall or floppy plants.

Tall plants with single stakes, such as delphinium, hollyhock, and gladoluls, can be braced by single bamboo or stiff wire stakes. The stake should be pushed into the ground about 1 inch from the base of the plant, preferably before it has grown to the point where it is staring to tip over. Attach the stem to the stake with plant ties, looping the ties in a figure eight around the stake and the stem and allowing room for the plant to move a bit.

Other plants, such as aster, chrysanthemum, coreopsis, heliopsis, and carnation, have a clump of half-grown plants. The twigs are then bent over and intertwined to form a sturdy framework over the young plants. The shoots grow through the twigs, eventually covering them with foliage and flowers.

Heavy, sprawling plants like baby's-breath are best supported by wire hoops (available from garden centers) or by corseting. To construct a corset, push bamboo or stiff wire stakes into the ground in a circle around the plant while it is small. The number of stakes to use depends on the size of the plant; 3 to 5 is usually adequate. Once the stakes are in place, tie them together around the outside (not through the middle) with string, creating two or three tiers. The shoots will grow through and around the spaces between the stakes and string, hiding them from view.