

# A Baltimore Garden

Picture any color that exists in nature. Layers of green—avocado, chartreuse, lime, teal; petals of magenta, raspberry, blush, pink, and fuchsia; the browns and grays of bark; the endless hues of yellows, oranges and reds; varying degrees of violets and blues. Whatever color imaginable prevails during some time of the year at Walnut Hill, the Baltimore garden of Penney (Green Spring Valley GC) and A.C. Hubbard.

The Hubbards' signature is on every morsel of their landscape. Layers and textures and drifts and colors reveal nearly five decades of a garden journey in this two-acre Eden. There are boulders and rocks and trees and shrubs; stone paths and rock walls add structure to the garden's foundation. Plant selections and combinations, carefully placed and composed, reveal the Hubbards' profound knowledge of how to grow a garden—all the more remarkable since they are not design professionals. Their landscape has been a family affair: A.C. built a rock garden with son Crawford in the 1970s. Thanks to "digging privileges" at a nursery going out of business around the same time, A.C. found homes for taxus, rhododendrons, and azaleas, all of which are big and sturdy now.

**Top:** Early spring garden. All photos by Roger Foley

**Bottom:** Late spring garden



Conifers and *Acers* are anchors at Walnut Hill. They add form and shape and interest year round. Penney's love affair with Japanese maples (*A. palmatum*) is evident throughout the landscape. Its leaf and bark color depend on the species, as do the shape and color of the leaves. One particular specimen, 'Koto No Ito,' stands outside her bedroom window and provides visual interest in all seasons. Its delicate, needle-like leaves turn a spectacular yellow in the fall. *Lagerstroemia* 'Natchez' figures prominently near the house, too. Penney believes the most unusual tree in their garden is the Japanese umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*), many of which were anniversary and birthday gifts from A.C.'s father who worked in a nursery after retirement. Although initially slow-growing, the umbrella pines at Walnut Hill are now large and a much-loved mainstay of the property.

In the mid 1990s, after many years of gardening on their own, the Hubbards hired the late Kurt Bluemel (1933-2014), a European plantsman who emigrated to the US from Switzerland. Fundamentally, Bluemel was an artist. His dream of becoming a painter was cut short by World War II, but he managed to



Winter garden



Late spring garden



Late summer garden



Fall garden

transfer his passion to plants; through horticulture and design, he used gardens as his canvas.

The Hubbards were intrigued by Bluemel's artistic approach, and they looked to him to design a master plan for their garden. They worked on their own for some 20 years—with results that many would envy—but they felt their plantings lacked “order.” Bluemel arrived at Walnut Hill, not armed with elaborate drawings and plant lists, but with a feel for the land. Once he started moving the dirt, his artistic sensibilities came into play. Bluemel, who came to be known as the “King of Grasses” for the hundreds he cultivated, quietly upended traditional American garden design, which he considered dull. He had a fondness for tall grasses and wildflowers, and for planting not by the threes and fives as planting norms dictated, but by the hundreds to achieve the effect in color and texture he envisioned. By doing so, he transformed garden design into fine art.

Succession planting is at its best at Walnut Hill where seven seasons are identified—winter, early spring, late spring, early summer, mid-summer, late summer, and autumn—too much going on to relegate to just four. In early spring,



Top: Late spring garden



Bottom: Mid-summer garden

trilliums emerge as do coiled fern fronds and scrolled hosta leaves, followed by gamboling daffodils and tulips and muscari. As spring marches into summer, lewisia arrives, then Russian sage, rudebekia, and roses...ligularia, dahlia, cleome, clematis...sedum, perennial begonia, and hydrangea. All the while, textures and colors change and morph as the seasons pass.

Although the garden looked like a war zone during the master plan installation, the result is a work of epic proportion that has propelled this lovely landscape into one of the finest gardens on the East Coast. Documented in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Gardens, Walnut Hill is a regular on tour itineraries and has been featured in regional and national magazines as well as in a book by Kathy Hudson, *On Walnut Hill*. Not that the Hubbards had all this in mind when they began their garden journey in 1969. Forty-eight years later, thanks to their determination and Bluemel's vision and lasting inspiration, A.C. and Penney are still at it, working in the garden and adding plants to this breathtakingly beautiful work in progress.

—Julie Badger, Sand Hills Garden Club, Zone VIII

# for All Seasons