



FROM A LIFETIME
OF CREATIVE WORK,
MARY DAVIS
HAS FASHIONED A WHOLLY
ORIGINAL
AESTHETIC

An Architect's Eye

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES MANN



One of a pair of simple yet commanding wood and stone circles in Davis's garden. She placed the stones to draw the eye upward, as the apple trees and Japanese maples do in neighboring beds.



MAJOR FEATURES OF THE DAVIS GARDEN

1. House and deck
2. Beach
3. Potting yard, with bonsai
4. Storm-inspired river of rock and boulders
5. Dry river of Mexican rock
6. Office
7. Giant laceleaf maple
8. Pond

THE STRUCTURE OF A SQUID'S EYE bears an eerie similarity to that of a human, despite having developed in an unrelated organism. The rise of similar forms from separate origins is a phenomenon known as convergent evolution. Like the torpedo shapes of porpoises, sharks, and penguins, the end products are similar in appearance, but the results of unrelated starting points.

Mary Davis's garden is a case in point. Built along a quiet cove on the coast of Washington State, a decidedly Japanese flavor seems evident in the large islands of smooth granite river rock and sweeping carpets of mossy groundcovers punctuated by round stepping stones and curving paths. The overall tone is one of understatement, from the absence of blooming perennials to the Dali-esque sprinkling of pruned apple trees and Japanese maples. In fact, everything about it shouts "fusion garden"—that blending of Asian and English styles which seems to represent the latest thinking in American garden design. But Davis's garden originates from an unexpected source that belies its appearance: her own creative and independent personality.

BEGINNINGS

Born to Danish parents, Davis was raised in Sacramento at a time when California was still truly golden. As a young girl,

Davis learned some important life lessons from her father while helping him with the drawings for his construction business. "My father firmly believed that a woman could do anything that a man could do," she remembers.

At a time when women hardly dared to entertain such dreams, Davis resolved to become an architect, graduating from the University of Washington with a degree in architecture during World War II. "We drew our designs with blackout curtains on the windows," she remembers. When asked how many other women were in her class, she states the obvious—none.

She married fellow architecture student George Davis in 1950, but not before blithely bending convention once again with a seven-year courtship. She and George were like-minded souls. "We were going to set the world on fire in architecture," Davis recalls. Their watershed moment came when George's father died, leaving him a wood

milling business and two dependent aunts. Their sense of family left them no choice but to take over.

Davis specialized in designing cabinets and storage spaces. "It influenced everything I did afterward," she confesses. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the couple were the first to introduce plastic laminates into kitchen cabinet and counter design. The Davises were able to market their innovations through the community of architects. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, Mary Davis lives by the sea (George died in 1995), at the foot of her garden, in a house that she designed in 1969. A trip through it is a study in her bold, modern, personal style. Large, stark white rooms are intersected with rugs cut in circle motifs. Retractable panels slide from hidden recesses to divide the rooms. All the cabinets, bookcases, and storage areas are hidden from view along inner corridors. It's very Bauhaus and Danish Modern in spirit, with the same clean, me-



Clockwise from upper left: A dry stream bed of Mexican river rock. Davis designed this sculpture to honor the triangle and the circle, recurring motifs in her work. While planning her garden, Davis drew the design first, then went looking for plants and materials to meet it. The chartreuse plant juxtaposed so effectively with the stones and mulch here is Scotch moss, *Sagina subulata* var. *glabrata* 'Aurea'. Sculptures resembling a pathway of glass pavers.

“DESIGNING A GARDEN ISN'T ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM DESIGNING A HOUSE, REALLY.” —MARY DAVIS

chanical aesthetic that spawned Kandinsky, Klee, and Mies van der Rohe. “Everything’s based on 120° angles and triangles,” Davis points out. “The triangle and the circle complement each other. I started with the triangle, then added the circle.” Outside, the house has massive planes of wooden decking and eight-foot overhanging eaves, perfect for shelter on a rainy day ramble.

A TEMPEST OF INSPIRATION

Until 1992, the Davises left the acre yard and its two ponds relatively undisturbed. “It was just an old apple orchard and some grass, with an asphalt driveway,” says Davis. “It was rife with blackberry vines,” remembers daughter Kit. “We made tunnels in the thickets.”

But a ferocious autumn storm, which swept a tsunami of water, rocks, and mud down the hill, suddenly changed everything. “It washed out most of our access road,” Davis recalls. But the flow patterns attracted her architect’s eye. “Nature stuck her foot in, so I said, ‘Let’s just join her.’”

Years of refining her design skills paid off. Being an architect, she first laid out the run of the rock. Then she mounded the circular beds—“You get more interesting shapes that way”—with the help of her tractor-driving maintenance man. “Designing a garden isn’t all that different from designing a house, really,” she says. “I like patterns, masses of color, patches of contrast. I don’t like square edges.

“I made my design, then I went looking for the plants,” she continues. She did most of the

planting herself. “If you use a lot of one thing, you get a bold statement. When I see people at the nursery buying pansies and getting one of each color, I am mystified.”

Indeed, monochromatic drifts of yellow pansies, along with some variegated hostas, are among the few annuals and perennials that have made it into the painterly creation she has fashioned. Her one concession to change is to vary the color of the pansies from year to year.

Entering Davis’s garden is like taking a stroll with Lewis Carroll’s Alice across a landscape of shifting scale and intensity. Quirky trees crouch over pools of color, bordered by brush banks of red rhododendrons. A chartrreuse field of Scotch moss (*Sagina subulata* var. *glabrata* ‘Aurea’) is amplified to near neon intensity by a shock of bright pink azaleas. Pebbly rounds of concrete pavers float on the canvas of moss like drops of oil on some giant burnished copper plate. Bands of green creeping potentilla (*P. verna*) and bronze bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*) arc as if the minimalist painter Robert Motherwell had dropped by for a consultation.

Adding to the surreal quality of the landscape are the many sculptures that the Davises collected over the years. “We bought whatever struck our fancy,” Davis says. The sculptures are enfolded in the landscape, each part of a larger artwork. As visitors descend the sloped drive, the scattering of art waiting below is heralded by the startling presence of a full-size, lilac-colored horse, standing expectantly at the gate.

The real focal point of the garden, however, is a singular tree. It became part of the garden after Davis’s son-in-law, Douglas Granum, took her to see a huge gargoyle of a laceleaf maple (*Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum* Atropurpureum Group) that he had discovered in a residential yard near the harbor. Davis promptly bought it from the homeowner, who had been contemplating cutting it down.

Responding to her muse once again yielded a remarkable result. “It’s a profoundly valuable tree,” says bonsai expert Dan Robinson of Elandan Gardens in

nearby Bremerton, with a distant “coulda-shoulda-woulda” glint in his eye. Robinson moved the tree for Davis and continues to prune it for her.

“It’s the biggest one in the state of Washington, trunk-wise,” he says. “It’s one of a kind.” Judging from the tree’s mass and quality, he believes that it was brought to Washington state by a ship’s captain, most likely in the 1880s. “We really don’t know, but it adds some romance to the story,” he confesses, laughing. Robinson explains that the maple’s extraordinary gnarled shape is due to the fact that it was not pruned for many years. The thickness of the top foliage compelled the new branches below to contort in many directions as they searched for light.

The big maple sits regally in the lower part of the garden, like some exotic creature from a foreign land, magnificent in its own right. It’s the prize specimen in Mary Davis’s collection of over 180 types of Japanese maples.

A SINGULAR VISION

Davis’s garden seems to plainly point out the resonance between Danish Modern and Japanese sensibilities. Both styles favor minimalism and stark, iconic, and sculptural elements rather than the masses of flower color and seasonal rhythms of English gardens. Davis’s garden also embodies a Japanese quality of timelessness, punctuated by the sudden surprise of strategically placed spring-blooming shrubs. The fields of moss and granite stones visually ebb and flow like the water that anchors so many traditional Japanese gardens.

But Davis is a true original who owes allegiance to no aesthetic vision but her own. She comes by her independent opinions and self-determination honestly, as a matter of life experience. She has fashioned the design of her garden and of her life from within, coupling her own inner sense of style with an unquestioning can-do attitude, bringing it forth without regard for standards and dictates of what is English, Danish, or Japanese. It’s her own. And therein lies a wonderful lesson for all of us who would aspire to create, rather than imitate. **H**



Mary Davis's Favorite Maples



Mary Davis has 180 Japanese maples; after the tree she rescued (pictured), the following are among her favorites. For further reading, consult *Japanese Maples*, by J.D. Vertrees, third edition revised and expanded by Peter Gregory (Timber Press, 2001) .

***Acer palmatum* subsp. *amoenum* 'Osakazuki'**

Osakazuki means "sake-cup-like leaf," referring to the leaves' tendency to cup at the base. Davis believes this to be "the most brilliant red of all maples."

***Acer palmatum* 'Sharp's Pygmy'**

An outstanding dwarf, with straplike, divided, toothed green leaves that turn deep orange to scarlet in the fall. Davis keeps this in a pot on her deck.

***Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum* 'Orangeola'**

Davis cherishes this cascading tree for its orange hues. New leaves emerge orange red in spring, develop to orange-flushed, red green in summer, and deepen to fiery orange red in autumn.