The Color Garden

HARLAND J. HAND, *El Cerrito, California*

The construction of this remarkable hillside garden was described in our issue for January 1976. Now the author discusses the ideas of light, shade, and color that guide his planting. Photographs by the author, except where noted.

The color motif of my El Cerrito, California, garden developed because of a very practical problem with a path. I had made a dirt path that wound down the steep slope of the garden. But it was always full of weeds and the packed soil made them very difficult to remove. To eliminate this problem, I made steps and stepping-stones of concrete, doing them in place, directly on the soil. When the concrete was finished, I became intrigued by the color relationship between it and the surrounding plants. There seemed to be something very special about the way the colors sharpened and gave drama to each other. To my eye, the concrete registered as a very light color, while the contrasting color of the plants, for the most part, seemed very dark. The significant thing was that the dark plants, though they actually were a middle tone, clearly registered as a dark color in contrast to the very light color of the concrete.

The relationship of these dark and light colors reminded me of the grey granite glacial formations of the high Sierra. The area of the mountains near Silver Lake with its strong color contrasts between the very light grey granite and the dark islands of conifers, was one giant, dramatic dark and light garden. I decided to use the strong dark and light contrast of that powerful landscape as the color motif of my garden.

I knew that light colors along a path would make for greater visibility at night, so I planted plants with light grey leaves near the sharpest curves. I discovered that, where I had placed these grey leaved plants next to the light grey concrete, the two colors combined to make one shape. When I widened and narrowed the light shape of the path by placing grey leaved plants next to it, I discovered a rhythmic pattern beginning to appear. I found that I could control the way my eye flowed over the garden by the way I varied these light shapes. So I began to add more and more concrete. I made paths through every area of the garden. If they led my eye too swiftly, I could vary the pace by narrowing them in some places and abruptly widening them in others. I eventually made such a network of light colored paths that they isolated mounds of soil, plants and native rock into islands of middle tone. Where these darker islands became too regular in size and shape, I made variations by running another path through them. For even greater variation I reversed the colors completely by tearing out some dark islands and replacing them with light colored, level rooms with concrete slabs for a floor and concrete benches for furniture. The additional concrete strengthened and massed the light shapes so much that the whole garden appeared more and more dramatic. The

Many plants worked into dark and light shapes to provide fully orchestrated color.

islands of dark seemed to grow out of a bedrock of light colored concrete slabs, benches and paths.

I added concrete pools, placing them so that they appeared to flow into each other. This helped to give a suggestion of a riverbed and, through the exploitation of this idea, I established a flow of dark and light color throughout the entire garden. The more concrete I put in, the more the garden appeared to be a light colored rock outcropping with islands of dark plants, much like that Sierra landscape.

I am constantly on the lookout for items that help widen and enrich the light colored concrete areas. I am continuously searching for grey leaved plants. Most such plants have special structures that make them grey. These structures give a texture to the leaf or stem

surfaces that can further vary the color by producing tiny textural shadows that change with the season and time of day. The furry rabbit ears of *Stachys olympica* have dense soft hairs which give the leaves a very light, almost white color that, when seen next to the concrete, is very unexpected. The white powdery covering of *Echeveria elegans* provides a delicate pale, grey-green that seems juicy in contrast to the hardness of the grey concrete. The leaves of some tansies are like tiny feathers. They are unusually soft and downy, giving a color that is actually an off-white. When planted next to the heavy concrete they make a contrasting combination that is very nearly unbelievable. The short hairs on snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*) make their leaves a dull greenish grey. I have found many plants that can be used to enhance or enlarge the light grey shapes of the concrete, but the above are my favorites.

White flowers give contrast to the light colored areas. They provide highlights that push forward to enliven the greys and grey-greens. They are especially effective when the white flowered plant itself has grey leaves. The small, airy, white flowers of snow-in-summer and the small white daisies of certain of the low growing chrysanthemums are both ideal for providing subtle highlights within the light colored shapes of the garden because both of them have grey leaves.

Other materials that act as light shapes or as part of a light shape are gravel (the coarse grey pebbles used as an aggregate for concrete), sculptures of birds and animals made of concrete or pottery, rocks (especially worn river rock) and driftwood.

The islands are made primarily of evergreen plants with some native rocks placed among them. Plants in leaf usually register as a middle tone which, in the color relationship of my garden, is dark. Most azaleas, rhododendrons, fuchsias, junipers, citrus, ferns and camellias are middle tone. I use some deciduous shrubs and trees for their middle tone leaves in summer and for their medium brown, airy branches in winter. These plants include lilacs, magnolias, roses, plums, prunes, apples, peaches, maples and many others. Like the woody plants, most herbaceous ones also have foliage that is middle tone. Agapanthus, hellebores, iris, lilies, arums, orchids, bergenia and geraniums (pelargoniums) are some examples. Some very low rock garden plants that fit this category include thyme, achillea, armeria, violets, iberis and some succulents. I also enjoy annual plants of this color range because they

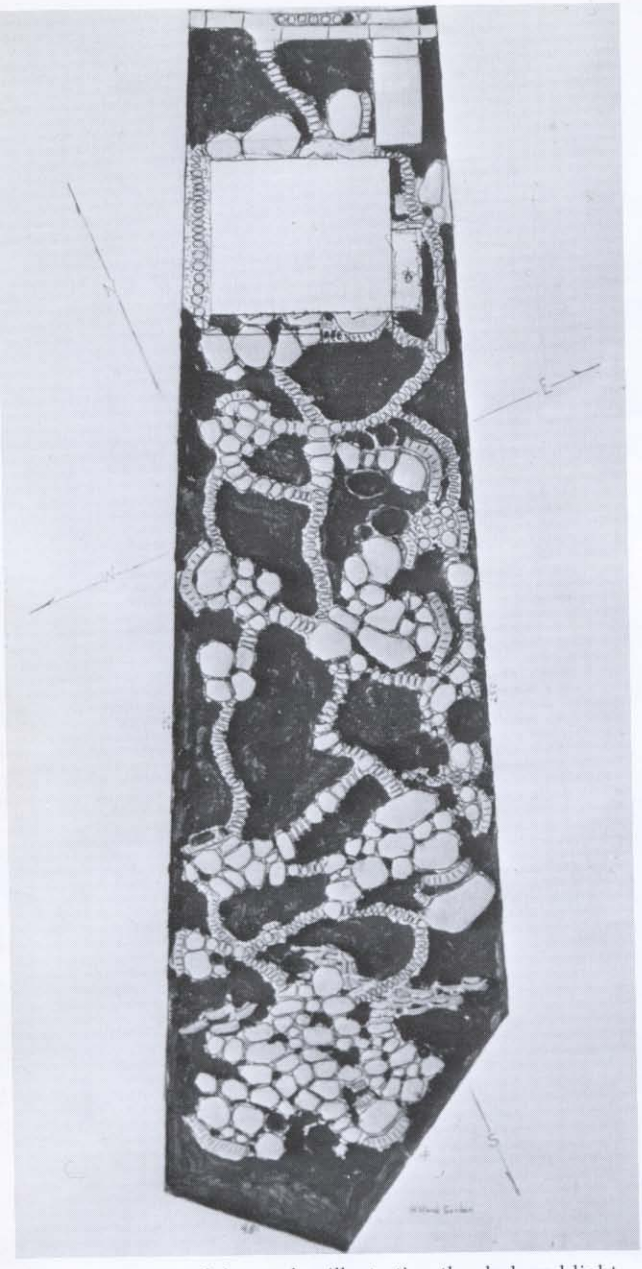

Diagram of the garden illustrating the dark and light color plan.

View in the Sierra Nevada showing the dark islands of trees against the pale granite.

The upper part of the garden, seen from above, also has dark islands. Here the contrast is with grey concrete.

give quick color to a newly planted garden before perennials have time to mature. These annuals may include petunias, lobelias, verbenas, salpiglossis, marigolds, poppies, nicotiana, ageratum, violas and pansies.

Whereas white flowers give contrast within the light shapes by acting as highlights, very dark colored plants give contrast to the middle tone areas by suggesting deep shadows. Those plants that register as extremely dark are rather rare; however, some examples are purple leaved plums, Irish yew, Hinoki false cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*), *Agave victoriae-reginae*, and especially *Aeonium arboreum* 'Zwartkop' with its maroon black leaves. Of course, the darkest color would be formed by the shadows on these dark plants. Some plants with strong architectural form, such as the conifers, also produce shadows

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At left, grey leaved plants and pale flowers emphasize light colored areas of concrete. Below, late in the year, succulents in many colors add a subdued but unending opalescence to the dominating background of greens. Photograph by Ruth Gilkey.

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of dark color, but shadows change during the day and so will not always give very dark color where it is needed. To help make up for this illusiveness, I set life sized figures of birds and animals, painted black, in places that need a bit of strong dark color for emphasis.

I try to group the plants within the middle tone islands so that they work like a well balanced flower arrangement. The tallest are off center, with middle sized ones on the outside and low plants arranged around the edges so that they tie into the level of the concrete surfaces. This can allow the color to actually surround the viewer, especially in places where trees with overhanging branches are used.

Plant groupings within the islands also depend upon two practical considerations; one, the amount of shade in case there is a large tree; and two, the varying amounts of water because of sprinkler problems. Shade plants are grouped in the shade, bog plants in the drainage runs, and some scree plants or California natives in the areas missed by the sprinklers. By working the practical problems and color composition together, I have been able to include thousands of interesting plants. They produce very satisfying color relationships even in the most difficult problem areas.

To unify the color and to give a natural flow of color throughout the garden, I place some dark items in the light colored areas and some light colored things in the dark areas. Between and around the concrete structures I spot a few plants of the dark leaved *Armeria juniperifolia* (white or pink flowered), *Veronica repens* (dark leaves and white flowers), *Iberis sempervirens* 'Snow Flake', *Achillea tomentosa* and other low rock garden plants that have dark color but do not restrict the flow of traffic through the rooms and paths.

I mix some grey things into the dark islands to help tie them to the surrounding masses of light color. I use such plants as white roses, magnolia, agapanthus and lilies. The white flowers provide a very sharp contrast to the dark foliage within the islands. Grey artemisia, salvia and oat grass are tall enough to hold their own when spotted within the islands. Grey driftwood pilings from San Francisco Bay are placed so that their light shapes soar out of the middle tone carrying the light color up and above my head. I use vines such as clematis, pandorea, billardiera, wisteria and climbing roses to soften the stark forms of the pilings. The white flowers and dark leaves of *Clematis* 'Henryi' against a grey driftwood piling is an astonishing combination.

The total effect of the dark and light design is planned to be one that not only leads the eye through the garden but it also moves out of the garden to the dark wooded ridges above and below, then on to the light grey buildings in the flatlands, to San Francisco Bay and the city beyond. Since the garden occupies a ridge, an enormous sky that fluctuates between darkness and lightness envelops it. Strong dark and light seems to be the dominant color motif for the whole Bay Area.

Full Color Orchestration

The most satisfying aspect of the dark and light motif of the garden is that it forms a base for fully orchestrated color. Any color that I want to use can be worked into it because every single color has its dark and light aspect. For example, yellow is a very light color and works fine within the light areas. Other colors such as blue, violet, green, orange and red are middle tone and work nicely within the dark islands. Pale colors (tints of the above) usually register as light. Shades (very dark colors) register from middle tone to near black. Each color can fit somewhere within the dark and light plan.

Besides fitting into the dominant color motif of the garden, each plant color has a special relationship with other colors. Colors do things to each other that are sometimes unexpected. For example, yellow; the yellow flowers of *Gazania uniflora* against its silvery leaves and the grey concrete make every color in this combination both brilliant and subtle.

Because of the grey of the concrete, the yellow of the flowers is vibrant and because of the yellow the grey of the concrete takes on a strange blue-violet cast. A spot of purple violas nearby makes those same yellow flowers look like jewels in a silver mounting.

Another striking example of what a single hue can do is shown by the small rose 'Garnet'. Its dark red flowers and dark reddish-green leaves against the light grey of pebbles and concrete make a combination that is bold yet deeply subtle. The eye will move toward this combination wherever it may be placed in the garden. This same rose makes blue ageratum shimmer intensely, and when I use it in a dark island with orange-red rhododendrons, magenta azaleas and dark pink roses, it makes a deep, blended, glowing combination. If I use this same maroon-red rose with warm and cool reds, it produces a kind of "red on red" relationship with such depth of color that I stand fascinated in front of it. When orchid, pinks and oranges are combined with the dark red of this rose, there is a feast of Persian color.

Within the middle tone of the dark islands, I experimented with all kinds of color relationships. To me, the most important idea that I discovered was that the closer the colors are in brightness and value (lightness and darkness), the more iridescent and glowing they all become and the less likely they are to cancel each other out. This is especially true of cool colors. Blues, violets and deep greens make a particularly rich combination within the middle tone of the islands. These are the peacock colors and are particularly useful both as background and as foreground color.

The rose 'Garnet' against light greys makes an arresting combination.

Color Impact

There are two devices that I often use to develop a satisfying color impact; one is to use many plants with similar colors together; the other is to use small amounts of warm colors to bring out cool colors and small amounts of cool colors to bring out warm colors. To give impact to retiring colors that are often lost in a planting, I usually combine them with similar colored flowers that are bold and rather vulgar in their impact. For example, I plant dull pinkish flowered plants such as *Enkianthus campanulatus* or *Tamarix parviflora* (the spring blooming tamarix) with the large flowered pink and red reticulata camellias, pink rhododendrons, pink azaleas and pink primroses. In this combination of similar warm colors, the small dull pink flowers brighten considerably and in turn they soften the impact of the large flowers. To make the whole combination bright and rich, I add just a little cool color; a few violets and blue muscari are all that is needed.

Another special way of increasing the impact of small but richly colored flowers is to plant them near a bench or walkway where they can be viewed up close. The big vulgar-flowered plants can be subdued by planting them in more distant positions. Their boldness can attract the eye to areas that it might otherwise skip over.

Although flowers of nearly every color appear throughout my garden, each area is dominated by a special color combination

wherein the abundance of one color unifies the others. For example, near the house is a quiet area with an abundance of white flowers throughout the entire year. Some white flowers that bloom in the spring are camellias, calla lilies, iberis 'Snow Flake', *Magnolia soulangiana* 'Alba', primroses and heather. Following these come azalea 'Snow Bird', the flowering peach 'Iceland', white flowering broom and *Wisteria floribunda* 'Longissima Alba' with the white *Clematis* 'Henryi' growing up the same pole and in bloom at the same time. In late spring and early summer, roses ('White Masterpiece', white polyanthus and a white climber), white Japanese iris, abutilons, fuchsias, and late rhododendrons keep the area white. The roses continue through the rest of the year along with white hydrangea, *Gypsophila* 'Bristol Fairy', *Bouvardia* 'Albatross', white fuchsias and many others. To help soften the whites, of course, there is the grey concrete and grey-leaved plants. For subtlety and richness I add just a few very light colors such as 'The Fairy', a pale pink rose, cream colored alyssum and bright yellow *Achillea tomentosa*. To brighten the whites I use dark foliaged plants and spots of dark red and dark blue. A 'Garnet' rose tree, deep magenta primroses, *Rochea coccinea*, gerberas and others provide the spots of dark red. The spots of dark blue include agapanthus, *Felicia amelloides*, several campanulas and *Sisyrinchium bellum* among others. Because this area near the house is dominated and unified by an abundance of white, I call it the White Garden.

The Yellow Garden is one of warm colors with yellow dominating over oranges, golds and warm reds. A few small, white flowered plants are added for subtle highlights with a few spots of blue and violet to make the warm colors of this area glow like fire.

The Blue Garden (it has cool colors dominated by blue) was completed in the spring and in order to bring it into full color as soon as possible, I put annuals among the newly planted perennial plants which will eventually take over. I planted annual lobelia in dark blue, light blue and mauve; petunias in purple, steel blue, dark blue, light blue, a few magenta and three bright red ones; to this mixture I added blue ageratum; blue and violet verbena with some blue violas and pansies for the more shaded parts. This planting was done in April, and in June there was a great show of billowing color. The whole combination glowed brilliantly even from a distance, especially after I added two fiery, orange-red gerberas.

Time Sequence Color

Some sections of the garden are planted so that different color combinations will dominate at different times during the year. To bring this about, I attempt to manipulate the color in order to produce a special kind of expression, like music, that is revealed in time sequences. The blue sequence starts in January with blue muscari, blue and violet primroses, blue Peruvian scilla, violets and purple violas — all showing a little color. These bloom more and more profusely, especially the muscari, until they hit a peak in late March. Then the blues subside slightly and are gradually overwhelmed in late April and early May by a spectacle of reds, pinks, orchids and yellows (azaleas and rhododendrons mostly) with just enough blue and violet left to intensify them all. By late May the warm colors quiet down and the blues commence their main surge to dominate, beginning with blue-violet Siberian iris, then Japanese iris, with some blue agapanthus just starting to flower. I have agapanthus that are very tall, others that are shorter; some have heavy flowered heads and others airy ones. They are planted abundantly in clumps and drifts all through the garden. The agapanthus increase their flower production through June, becoming a crescendo of blue that has its climax in July and August. At this same time, blue-violet pleroma, blue *Solanum rantonnetii*, fuchsias in many shades of blue and violet, summer violets, several lavenders, campanulas, dark blue felicias, blue-violet and mauve *Tradescantia virginiana*, blue veronicas, blue-violet and mauve clematis and many others are all blooming profusely,

adding to the intensity of the blue which flows off in every direction taking the eye through every vista of the garden. After this climax the blue subsides again, but this time it gently gives way to a saturation of greens.

The greens of my garden play a background theme with a climax in early fall. There are fewer flowers blooming between September and February, so during this time the garden becomes a saturation of greens with a few spots of other colors to brighten and enrich them. The middletone greens that form most of the islands include green-greens, rusty-greens, blue-greens, yellow-greens and others, all in rich variety of leaf and stem texture. The yellow-greens of golden cypress, golden juniper and tree ferns furnish the highlights. The dark, blackish, greens of Irish yew, Hinoki cypress, rosemary and some of the azaleas and rhododendrons add the deepest shades.

During the late season, spots of red roses intensify the greens as do the pinks of fuchsias, roses, abutilons and geraniums. Yellow flowers add bright highlights and with the yellow-greens, seem like beams of sunlight on a dull day. Blue and violet flowers inject a touch of mystery and richness to the tapestry of green. Plants with colored leaves such as purple-leaved plum, red phormium and a rainbow of succulents continue a kind of subdued opalescent color that does not end.

Color and Space

During the late season, when flowering has subsided, I am most aware of the placement of color in the garden. At this time, it seems clearer to me just how color can distort the feeling of space. Warm colors seem to advance like the warmth of a fire and cool colors seem to recede like the sky on a cold clear day. The warm color of the yellow garden, which is some distance from the house, seems close and makes the cool colors of the blue garden beyond seem so far away that to prevent its seeming to recede completely from the rest of the garden, I had to plant the everblooming, salmon-pink rose 'Margo Koster', beyond it.

Another aspect of color that comes out of this advancing and receding is a kind of *trompe l'oeil.* For example, in order to give unity and rhythm of color to the garden, I place a color, such as yellow, in three different positions so that one yellow plant is close, the second is middle distance and the third is in the background. If I stand so that the three yellow plants line up and appear to merge into one yellow shape, I will be slightly confused because I cannot quite figure the position of what now seems to be a single yellow shape. But if I move a few feet to one side, the single shape will again separate into three distinct shapes, each with a clear position in space. Purposefully arranging colors so that they alternately confuse and clarify spatial relationships is a device that can add an interest going beyond the mere presence of the items in the garden. This is one of those illusive things that can give a special magical vitality to a design.

Color relationships are constantly changing as the viewer moves through the garden. Where a color is seen as the focus of attention from one position, from another position this same color is seen as part of the background for another color. This aspect can produce some unexpected color relationships that can add richness and unity to the entire garden. For example, one spring day while sitting on a bench at the top of the garden, I was surprised to discover that the colors from that view lined up like a rainbow, (but not in that order); blue iris were closest, purple iris next, then magenta azaleas, red rhododendrons, than an orange-red azalea, orange aloes and finally yellow alyssum in the far distance. This had not been planned, but it did unify several areas of the garden.

Pools provide endless color variation because the effects of water are everchanging. The pools in my garden were conceived as having color that would reverse the space of the dark islands, that is, be a dark hole instead of a dark mound. Each one was to be a ring of light grey concrete around dark water, a kind of variation of the concrete slab. For

An abundance of white flowers dominates and unifies the colors of the White Garden.

the most part the pools actually do what I had planned. However, the extent of the color variation provided by the water goes beyond these ideas, because water reflects everything around it and changes color with the time of day and with the position of the viewer as he moves around. Because of the organisms that grow in it, water can usually be seen as a dark color, but at times it becomes a very intense light-colored surface, especially when it reflects the sky or light colors nearby. By its reflections, water provides echoing color that can rhythmically repeat any color that is around it. A solitary green fern is reflected in the water and so seems less isolated; or a clump of yellow alyssum is reflected in the water and the yellow becomes doubly abundant. A reflection can also increase the amount of a color to the point where the balance of the color relationship is destroyed.

Not only does light affect the reflections on water and thus change color relationships, but changing light affects the color in the whole garden. Morning light tends to cool all the colors, while afternoon light tends to warm them. The changing position of the sun moves the shadows around so that plant colors are bright and advancing one moment and dull and receding the next. Shadows can change a shape that is light colored one moment into one that is middletone the next.

Every single part of the color garden must be maintained because there is not a square inch that is without color. Dead flowers must be picked off, proportions controlled by pruning and by the removal or the installation of plants. Diseased plants have to be treated, weeds removed and paths and rooms must be swept of garden debris. The colors can be dull and depressing one moment and, with a little cleaning, become bright and delightful a short while later.

I do not believe that full control of the color in natural light can be achieved. However, it is fascinating to be able to understand what happens to color in the garden and to try to make the most of every circumstance.