Moss Garden Masterpiece

By Mark Dwyer

Layers of perennials and shrubs embrace the moss carpeting Dale Sievert's Japanese garden in Waukesha, Wisconsin.
A series of paths moves you through a progression of spaces, each of which is defined by available sunlight and changes in elevation. Mossy garden vignettes begin at the front of the residence and weave through the garden with moss not only evident in large patches but on rocks, logs, and in many containers. Thousands of perennials, planted primarily for their foliage color and texture, also thread throughout the space, forming a rich matrix of color. “I love perennials with arresting foliage and form, and care little about their short-lived flowers,” says Sievert. More common hostas, ferns, and traditional groundcovers are augmented by drifts of less common Rodgers’s flower (Rodgersia sp.), yellow waxy bells (Kirengeshoma sp.), umbrella plant (Doronicum petala), and the always eye-catching ‘Sun King’ Japanese spikenard (Aralia cordata).

Top right: Dale Sievert shows off one of his favorite cultivated moss hummocks accented with ferns and yellow wax bells (Kirengeshoma palmata). Bottom right: Beneath the multi-stemmed katsura tree (Cercidiphyllum japonicum), a sinuous rock-lined path leads over a footbridge to the raked gravel garden.

Opposite page: Repurposed antique Milwaukee bricks create the paths of the Williamsburg-inspired formal garden filled with red and white annual begonias. Instead of a traditional lawn, Sievert has cultivated tree moss (Climaciun americanum) to replicate the effect of turf.

While the use of moss is a dominant theme in Sievert’s garden, his property features a wide range of other plants. A cacti and succulent garden occupies the sunny front elevation, along with some mosses that tolerate full sun. For arriving visitors, the first indication they are in for some serious moss gardening starts under a grove of ironwood trees (Ostrya virginiana) along the driveway. Closer to the house, a sunken garden featuring tropicaals in containers transitions to multiple shady moss respires along the edge of an oval of turf. In the back corner of the property, which is the highest point, a shady hillside garden leads to a significant waterfall system. The waterfall, ponds, and streams, all accented with moss, flow back toward the house, where they culminate in a Japanese-style garden. The Japanese garden, which was started in the late 1990s, has
become so magical that Stever persisted in a Midwest garden. He could see the scene throughout the spring and summer. A formal garden, inspired by a trip to the former Rosemoor Garden in Marshfield, Wisconsin, was the first impression. The garden is located on a sloped piece of land with a 20-foot elevation change from front to back. A system of retaining walls made of railroad ties and stacked rock creates wonderful planting pockets. The rock garden, which was changed forever, became an instant favorite. Stever recalls a small mound of moss on the hillside that evokes the image of a grand manorial garden. Looking back on the garden, he marvels at the diversity of mosses and ferns that grow in the garden, forming a dense cover of greenery. The garden is a testament to the power of nature and the beauty of simplicity. The Stever garden, with its carefully selected plants and thoughtful design, is a true masterpiece of landscape architecture.

In addition to his transformational visits to Forster Garden, Stever's gardening philosophy has been informed by his travels, which include visits to more than 100 countries. He has visited Japan twice, primarily to see the region's renowned moss gardens. "Dale's mosses are a true inspiration," he says. "They are a testament to the beauty of simplicity and the power of nature."
extensive travels around the world to visit botanical gardens have inspired him to create his own impressive moss retreat," says Annie Martin, owner of Mountain Moss Enterprises, Inc., and recognized moss expert. "His meticulous attention to detail has enabled him to maintain the moss magic.

There is little downtime for Sievert, who at 78 still puts in at least 10 hours each day in the garden when he's not traveling or, occasionally, consulting on the use of mosses in other gardens. He has created five other well-received moss gardens both in public and private situations and has helped at many more, including at Rotary Gardens and at the Anderson Japanese Gardens in Rockford, Illinois. "Dale is absolutely passionate about moss and has been a great asset for us here at Anderson Japanese Gardens," says Tim Gruner, curator and head of horticulture for Anderson. "He has a great depth of knowledge regarding moss and how to grow it."

WORKING WITH MOSSES

Sievert's skill with mosses is based partly on research and partly on trial and error. He freely admits that his first foray into moss gardening was not a success. After collecting moss off a neighbor's cedar shake roof (with permission of course), he found the transplanted pieces did not establish. This led him to the realization that replicating the conditions in which your "target moss" is found is a key to success. His next try with transplanted moss from the woods of another neighbor settled in well in his garden.

Sievert typically only collects small, four to six-inch patches of moss from any one site so that the original patch is able to regenerate easily. Leaving about a half inch of soil substrate under the moss while carefully skimming it up allows for it to be transferred, pressed into place and watered. Moss does not have true roots and attaches by use of rhizoids, hence its ability to attach to boulders and other hard surfaces.

For those who might be interested in trying to grow moss, Sievert advises, "Start each moss garden with a sever-
From the entrance gate, create a variety of moss terrains and highlight the Japanese garden. Learning the eye through the space.