



by Catherine Dold

Lauren Springer Ogden

Plant-Driven Designer

“If I’d been a good girl, I’d have done the science thing, gotten my Ph.D., become a professor, and done research on root hairs,” says Lauren Springer Ogden, garden designer, author, and 1989 graduate of the college.

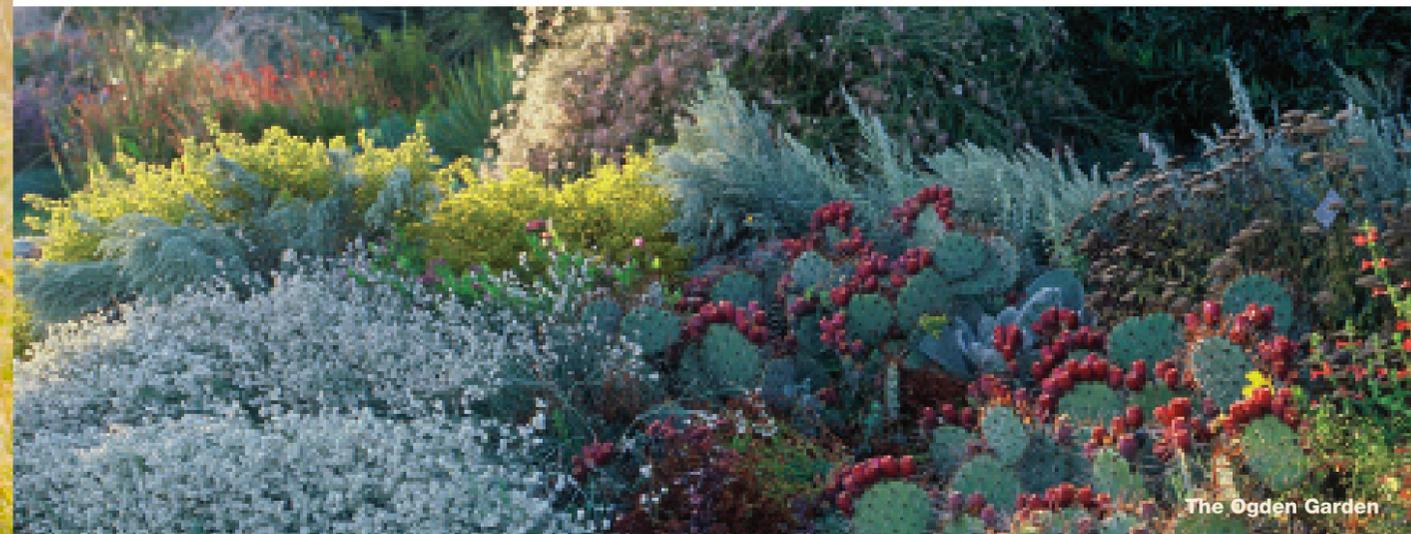


PHOTO: SUPPLIED BY LAUREN SPRINGER OGDEN

Instead, armed with a sense of curiosity she says was “all over the map” and no desire to do the “focused thing,” Springer Ogden followed her own path after receiving her master’s degree, carving out a career working in and designing public and private gardens around the United States and the world, giving lectures, and writing.

Twenty years later, she is one of the most influential horticulturalists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, says Panayoti Kelaidis, senior curator at the Denver Botanic Gardens who considers Springer Ogden “the premier garden designer in America.” Her most recent book, *Plant-Driven Design: Creating Gardens That Honor Plants, Place, and Spirit*, co-authored with her husband, Scott Ogden, is an “extraordinarily exciting concept,” he adds.

“I’ve always loved plants,” recalls Springer Ogden, curled up in an easy chair in her Fort Collins, Colorado, home. “I grew them on my mom’s windowsills. I spent summers hiking in the Alps, where I got interested in wildflowers.

But I never knew you could make a living doing anything with plants.”

A Pennsylvania native, Springer Ogden got an undergraduate degree in Spanish and Latin American literature at the University of Pennsylvania. “A useless degree,” she laughs, “but a good liberal arts education.” A trip out west after college sent her in a new direction. “I came out here to visit, and I loved it. I’ve always loved being outdoors, so I thought, ‘Why not be a park ranger?’” She enrolled in the Penn State forestry program in the early 1980s, but soon realized job prospects for rangers were slim. A class in the horticulture of woody plants, however, sent her in yet another direction: a second undergraduate degree, this one in agriculture. She spent a few years working in nurseries and public gardens, then returned to Penn State for a master’s degree in horticulture. “It was a great program,” she says of her two years in grad school. “They really let me fly.” The faculty gave her a lot of freedom in building her academic program, allowing her

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to do a “lot of weird stuff,” including an internship in Ireland, independent studies, and writing classes. “It allowed me to explore my interest in the art of gardening.”

On returning to Colorado in 1989, Springer Ogden began working on her own garden, her first “laboratory.” And she started writing about it. She wrote a garden column for the *Denver Post* as well as feature articles for national gardening magazines. *The Undaunted Garden*, her book about designing and maintaining that first

garden in the harsh Colorado climate, was published in 1994. Kelaidis, who described the book as a “horticultural Chinook wind blasting stale ideas and clichés out of the way,” says the book made Springer Ogden a national star.

“What continental North American gardeners need are new models for their gardens,” she wrote. “While the classics of English and coastal garden writing serve as wonderful bedtime reading and artistic inspiration, what we need out here are some new plants,

combinations, and ideas that help gardens face the severity of our climates with beauty and diversity. We need to create undaunted gardens.”

“The undaunted garden,” she wrote, “is lovingly composed and cared for by the gardener, yet thrives not so much because of him or her, but because it is in tune with the natural forces around it.” An entire chapter, for example, talks about how to deal with the hailstorms that can wreck a garden.

The Undaunted Garden went into five printings, and the American Horticultural Society named it one of the 75 Great American Garden Books of the twentieth century. “I think it touched people because it was a story about trying stuff, about killing stuff,” says Springer Ogden.

After that early success, Springer Ogden continued to design gardens, including an influential “water smart” garden and others at the Denver Botanic Gardens. But over time she noticed the world of gardening was changing, and not in a good way.

“In the 1990s, I thought, wow, we’ll finally become a nation of gardeners, like the Japanese and the Europeans. We’re going to actually like tending plants.” However, there was soon a “real regression in horticulture and gardening,” she says, partly because Americans figured out that it’s hard work.

Tending plants fell out of fashion. “Instead, people started focusing more on showing off and having an outdoor lifestyle. Outdoor kitchens and large patios became popular. The garden was and continues to be consumed by outdoor furniture and accoutrements.”

To drive home that point in lectures, Springer Ogden sometimes holds up the cover of a popular garden design magazine. “You can’t see any plants!”

“Call it an outdoor space,” she says. “But don’t call it garden design. It’s not a garden. It has nothing to do with gardening.”

Springer Ogden believes that large public gardens are suffering as well, becoming more like outdoor museums and event centers. Too many garden designers, she writes, “simply avoid any intimacy with plants . . . and instead rely on a limited, proven palette and series of plant combinations that they trot out like familiar dinner recipes, again and again.”

In response to these distressing trends, Springer Ogden and her husband, Scott Ogden, also a horticulturalist and garden designer, began speaking and writing about “plant-driven design.” Their most recent book, *Plant-Driven Design: Creating Gardens That Honor Plants, Place, and Spirit*, was published in 2008.

“Plant-driven design means you start off with the plants,” she explains, “not the patio, the furniture, the fountain. You can have something artistic, trendy, or modern, but the plants are the primary players.”

“These gardens have more plants, more types of plants,” she continues. “And the plants are allowed to get away with more. We let them do what they are going to do in the garden until they get in the way of walking or they really look like hell. We don’t know what they are going to do, and we know plants pretty well. They are creatures; they do their own thing.”

Plant-Driven Design was published after three years of work by Springer Ogden and her husband. “The single most essential element in any garden is not some particular object, plant, or tool,” they wrote in the preface. “What’s vital is a gardener who loves it. . . . Unfortunately, much of what is promoted as or called a garden in North America is nothing more than a landscape installation. Love has nothing to do with it . . . making plants the main focus of design returns garden making to being about a relationship between plants and people. That relationship should be a happy one.”

“*Plant-Driven Design* turned garden design on its head,” says Tom

Fischer, editor-in-chief at Springer Ogden’s publisher, Timber Press, and her former editor at *Horticulture* magazine. “The party line for decades has been that you start with the hardscape elements—the walls, paths, fences, arbors, any part of the garden that is not alive,” he explains. The plants came second and often not many of them. “Many landscape architects end up with a palette of ten plants that they use over and over,” says Fischer. “Lauren and Scott encouraged people to broaden their plant knowledge, to see what they can do if they work with dozens of different types of plants.” Indeed, Springer Ogden’s Fort Collins garden boasts more than 3,000 species.

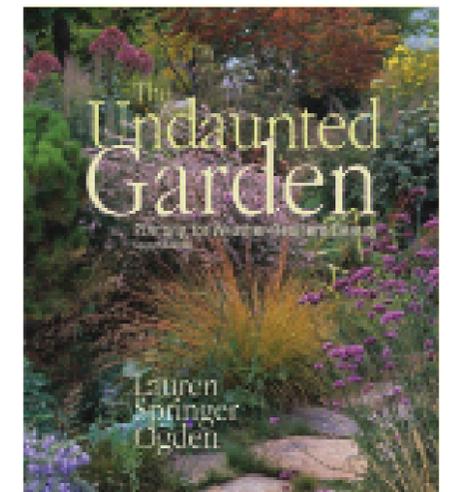
Kelaidis agrees *Plant-Driven Design* was groundbreaking. “It challenged all presumptions of traditional architecture and landscape design,” he says. “Many landscape architecture programs don’t even teach plants these days. Lauren and Scott launched a full frontal assault on that. But, as with anything new, most people don’t yet get it. She is ahead of the curve, like a great artist.”

“If you are a gardener, you have a relationship with your plants,” Springer Ogden explains, heading outside to walk through her garden. “You have a relationship with nature. You notice cycles, insects, birds. You can’t help but be connected to nature. If you make just an outdoor room, you are not going to have that.” She worries that children who have no plants in their lives will grow up unaware of nature and environmental issues. “If another five million acres gets swallowed up by suburbia, they are going to say, ‘Yeah, so what?’ They won’t even know what they have lost.”

Walking through her garden, where the plants do all seem to do their own thing, growing over paths, climbing up to the roof, nearly blocking the front door to her house, Springer Ogden happily describes the wildlife that visits her suburban yard: multitudes of birds, several raccoons

who gorge themselves on grapes, and at least one bear who tried to climb up to the grapes, leaving behind deep claw marks on a tree. “I love hanging out here. It’s gorgeous, it’s serene.”

Gardeners who want their own plant-driven gardens needn’t wait. Just jump in, she advises. “Be okay with falling in love with plants and indulging yourself in trying them in the garden,” she says. “Don’t get nervous about whether they are going to die, and don’t worry about having it all figured out before you put something in. Keep finding plants that interest you and find ways to put them in your garden where they look good, thrive, and show off their best qualities. Allow that to inform your design.” ■



Lauren Springer Ogden and Scott Ogden have a new book coming out in fall 2011 tentatively titled *200 Best Drought-Tolerant Plants*. “It should be of interest to anyone concerned about water use and how to conserve scant resources,” says Tom Fischer, editor-in-chief of the publisher, Timber Press.

Also due out in 2011 is a second updated and expanded edition of Springer Ogden’s 1994 classic, *The Undaunted Garden: Planting for Weather-Resilient Beauty* (Fulcrum Publishing).