

Profile By Lois H. Feinstein

Bloomin' Brilliant

She was a rebel and a trailblazer. Now Jane Silverstein Ries' legacy lives in the Denver landscape.

THE ELFIN WOMAN, her white hair pulled back in a topknot, keeps up her end of the tennis rally until her opponent smashes one to the back of the court. In a vain attempt to return the shot, she crashes into the fence and is pierced by the thorns of roses planted there. "What a terrible place this is to plant roses," she yells, admonishing no one in particular. Dropping her racket, she heads to the sidelines, pulls a pair of pruning shears out of her bag, eliminates the hazard with a few snips, picks up her racket, and returns to the game.

Jane Silverstein Ries, Colorado's first female landscape architect, was never wishy-washy about anything, particularly when it had to do with garden design. And though she passed away this summer at the age of 96, this month she'll be posthumously awarded the American Society of Landscape Architect's highest honor, the ASLA medal.

In 1933, when the majority of women were raising families or working in traditional careers for women, Silverstein blazed new trails in Denver landscape design. She passionately created gardens that were extensions of a home's living space, and woe to the client who referred to his "yard;" according to Silverstein Ries, yards were places to hang laundry—gardens were for comfort and enjoyment. "She was quite authoritarian about it," recalls Cathe Mitchell, who worked with Silverstein Ries. "She would tell her clients what their gardens should be like—and they would learn to live up to her garden." In her 60-year career, she was an adviser to governors and mayors, a board member of the Colorado Nature Conservancy, adviser to the Denver Botanic Gardens, and instigator of innumerable civic projects. She founded and was president of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects; she also served on a task force



SEE JANE PLANT In an era when women were typists or teachers, Jane Silverstein Ries became Colorado's first female landscape architect—changing the way Denver gardens

to establish a graduate program of landscape architecture at the University of Colorado in Denver.

Her ideas about gardening were as radical for her time as they were inflexible. Disdaining the traditional white birch/rosebush plantings that were prevalent at the time, Silverstein Ries was always on the lookout for beautiful, new varieties

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of plants that would do well in Colorado's alkaline soil and water. Her garden designs transcended flora; they also included patios, raised beds, artwork, play areas for children and pets, and lighting design. "Jane was the only person in Denver using garden lighting to create moods as recently as 25 years ago," says Guenther Vogt, whose landscape design and construction business brought many of Silverstein Ries' plans to fruition. "She would visit client sites at night, then create designs with lights hung in tree branches to splash dramatic silhouettes on the ground.

"She loved plants and would actually jump for joy when she saw something new," Vogt recalls. Her favorites were plants that were extremely difficult to locate, and she pushed local nurseries to expand their selections to include the exotic and unusual. On strolls through her Capitol Hill neighborhood, she was not above digging up enticing "samples" from other gardens and planting them at home, moving them from one location to another to determine optimum growing conditions.

Her gung-ho spirit evidenced itself early on when, at age 12, young Julia Jane Silverstein announced to her parents that she would not marry or have children, but that she would have a career and it would not be the expected choice, teaching. After graduating from Denver's East High, she spent two years at the University of Colorado, then left Colorado in 1929 to attend the Lowthorpe School of Landscape Architecture for Women, in Groton, Massachusetts, because, she noted with dismay, "Harvard did not accept girls." Silverstein adored horticulture, however; she completed the school's extensive course of study and returned to her beloved Colorado to open her landscape architecture business.

Although Silverstein's first clients were friends of the family, her company was soon thriving. Then, in 1943, the spunky 33-year-old headed east to join the Women's Reserve of the Coast Guard as a Property Survey Officer. Stationed in New York, she was assigned to inventory equipment, a task the detail-minded Silverstein attacked with relish. When her service was completed in 1945, she worked for a large design firm in New York City. In 1947, she returned to Denver and plunged back into business, finding time along the way to relent somewhat on her childhood vow and marry Henry Ries in 1953.

Before the idea of recycling ever hit the mainstream, Silverstein Ries had that ethic firmly in place. She searched antique stores and junk shops for unusual objects to place in gardens. The fresh flowers on her dining

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table went into the refrigerator between meals so they would last the week. In an article she wrote titled "The Christmas Garden," she instructed readers in the making of luminarias: "If you are thrifty and keep the short ends that are left over from your table candles, they are just right for the purpose." She was also a pack rat, holding on to every scrap of notepaper, household paperwork, and each of the more than 1,500 home landscape plans she drew. Her personal archives, available at the downtown branch of the Denver Public Library, comprise 60 boxes as well as architectural folders and storage tubes and include such ephemera as thank-you letters, financial information, newspaper clippings, bills, and magazine subscription information.

As her private clientele grew, so did Silverstein Ries' involvement in designing civic projects. During her career, she designed plans and served as a consultant for the Denver Botanic Gardens, Colorado's Executive Mansion, Civic Center Park, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, the East High School Esplanade, the Denver Art Museum, Children's Hospital, the Molly Brown House, and a number of buildings at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

"Jane was constantly coming up with ideas to improve Denver's environment," Mitchell remembers. "If she wanted to accomplish something, she threw a dinner party. She didn't cook, but she was well-connected and knew exactly whom to invite. The meal magically appeared and whatever project Jane wanted to instigate would be on its way to fruition."

By the 1970s, "Miss Jane" was a legendary figure in horticultural circles both in Denver and across the country. She was a striking presence—chiseled features, snowy white hair, and a deep tan. She took to wearing a miniature silver vase pinned to her shirt, filled with tiny fresh flowers in water. She worked well into her 80s, a self-described "octogeranium."

But her energy began to dim with the onset of dementia in the early 1990s and, according to Mitchell, "she just kind of dissolved." The woman who left a visible legacy in public and private spaces throughout Denver died on July 6. Before her death, friends and colleagues established the Jane Silverstein Ries foundation to award grants for projects that foster intelligent use of land and provide scholarships for students of landscape architecture, a fitting tribute to a woman who lived her life in the same manner she tended her garden—in her own words, "well and high-spirited." ▲

Lois Feinstein is a Denver-based freelance writer.