

A Landscape, and a Concept, for All Seasons



SUZANNE DeCHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The New York Botanical Garden's new Native Plant Garden is an ever-changing show along its paths and boardwalk through woodlands, glades, a meadow and wetlands. In bloom this week: Virginia bluebells and dogwood.

When you visit the new Native Plant Garden at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx — and it should be a matter of when, not if — you will not see what I saw last week, and perhaps not

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even the garden that will attract visitors over the next two event-filled weekends. Gardens are like rivers. Not only can't you step into the same garden twice, but their evolution is so fluid, you also can't even step into the same garden once.

So what you might see at the new garden's opening on Saturday, with its nearly 100,000 plantings of some 400 species native to the Northeast, spread over a freshly landscaped 3.5 acres, is really a plan just beginning to blossom. It is now a gently ornamented structure, a still-skeletal display awaiting imminent transformation. We look at what is but see what is about to be. Philosophers would say that a museum exhibition with its static displays of venerable objects is about "being"; here the focus is on "becoming."

That means that the plantings will eventually start living up to their uncanny

names: the plugs of white wand beardtongue and rattlesnake master will fill in on the meadow; the wild columbines with their red-and-yellow flowers will be more than a twinkle in the gardener's eye; and heartleaf foamflowers will emerge with eccentric finery. By now, the nautilus-shell curls of nascent Dixie wood ferns and cinnamon ferns that I saw will surely be unfurled. Will Virginia bluebells have peaked?

This idea of process and transformation — of a garden as a web of interacting flora changing over time — is found here not only because the garden is new: That idea is also one of its pre-occupations. It is an aspect of the cultivation style that the Botanical Garden has been exploring in its major reconstructions of recent years, in the Azalea Garden and the restoration of the adjacent Thain Family Forest. That style reflects an important change in our understanding of nature and gardens.

The new garden, created with a \$15 million grant from the Leon Levy Foundation, is on a site where Elizabeth Knight Britton, the wife of the Garden's founding director, Nathaniel Lord Britton, established a haven for native flowering plants; she is honored here by a bronze plaque from 1940. Native plants of the Northeast are a major subject of the Garden's cataloging and research.

That region reaches westward to the edge of the Great Plains, and stretches

The Native Plant Garden opens on Saturday at the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx River Parkway, Exit 7W, and Fordham Road, Bedford Park, the Bronx; (718) 817-8777, nybg.org.

from southern Virginia to southern Canada — an immense area. But the new garden, through luck and planning, encompasses much of its variety. Designed by Sheila A. Brady of the landscape architectural firm Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, the garden embraces shaded woodlands, glades, a sunny meadow and wetlands, each planted with species selected with the garden's curator, Joanna Payne.

Each of these miniature habitats flows almost edgelessly into the next, and is meant to be able to sustain its particular ecological character with its distinctive plants. Through the garden's heart runs a crescent-shaped 230-foot-

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Joanna Payne, the new garden's curator, selected the species on view.

long water feature — a series of artificial pools fed by underground cisterns holding 50,000 gallons of rainwater.

You can walk along a boardwalk of black locust or on a walkway of bonded yet permeable pebbles, or through a copse of rhododendrons on a chipped-wood path. The garden includes a pavilion that will serve as a classroom near its lushest section, where are found the only nonnative plants here: mature conifers known as Japanese torreyas, planted soon after the Botanical Garden's founding in 1891, that are too rare in cultivation to think of uprooting.

But even with the young growth, you get a sense of the spread of textures and colors. And maps were used to plan seasonal colors and plantings, highlighting spring ephemerals like the white trilli-

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Images of the Native Plant Garden at the New York Botanical Garden: [nytimes.com/arts](https://www.nytimes.com/arts)

ums and Virginia bluebells, now in bloom; the summertime tall blazing stars with their feathery purple flowers; the aromatic aster of autumn; and the red-twig dogwoods of winter.

So natural does it all seem that it might not be apparent how much calculation was required, and how different this approach is from those of gardens past. Think of the formal 17th- and 18th-century gardens, with their shaped hedges and geometric lawns, their strict boundaries, their determination to leave no plant's stalk unmarked by human shaping; or of the Romantic British garden that rebelled by placing artificial ruins in the midst of landscapes self-consciously gone to seed.

But contemporary gardens evolved out of the "natural garden" concept developed by the Irish gardener William Robinson in the 19th century. One ideal was to make human interference seem as invisible as the formal garden makes it visible. In the last 40 years, the founders of Ms. Brady's firm, James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme, created what they called "the New American Garden." Borders, if visible, are permeable; plants look as if they had, with picturesque nonchalance, grown in the wild; grasses are plentiful. In these displays you can feel the passage of time and the continuing changes yet to come.



A goldfinch in a stream feeding wetlands, and a woodlands cinnamon fern.



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No plant exists in isolation; nothing is static. Such gardens pay nature and its dynamism homage.

The Native Plant Garden embraces that idea but also gives the screw another turn, as if reminding nature of the human thumbprint, which is assertively present yet not intrusive. A stump from a 40-year-old black cherry tree blown down by Hurricane Sandy is left in place (with an explanatory sign), but we are not told that the loss of the tree meant that the shade-loving plants at its feet had to be calculatedly altered.

But I wasn't convinced by the geometric expanse of the central water feature, with its manufactured borders and 14-ton stone weir; I was puzzled by its self-conscious, almost modernist artifice in the midst of a garden designed to seem so fluidly boundless. Perhaps it will take on a different character as nature leaves its own thumbprint.

The contemporary interest in "native" gardens is related to these concerns about nature and its processes: in

some ways, the interest is in restoring a habitat, trying to reproduce an ecological world that is premodern, freed from the disruption of external forces. In June, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden will open an expanded Native Flora Garden, focusing on flora of the New York region, which also seems interested in showing what the garden calls "ecogeographic" contexts.

Here in the Bronx, signs remind us that the natural world is not just flora. We learn that by focusing on native plants, and eliminating those that did not evolve in this region over many centuries, the garden also affects wildlife, including insects. Monarch butterflies, for example, will only appear, as here, in the presence of milkweed.

This new garden, then, is the climax of the Botanical Garden's ambitious projects to remake itself. The new garden is not static or sculptured; it is a shifting, transforming web of interactions: Nature, shaped, nudged, guided and cultivated, by its human servants.