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ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

New York Botanical Garden *Azaleas blaze in intensities of purple and dark pink at the Azalea Garden's entrance.*

A Method Behind All the Wildness

Stand at an overlook along the mile of paths winding through the enchanting 11-acre Azalea Garden that opens on Saturday at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, and look down over the lush plantings. Broad sprays of white, pale pink and lavender seem almost haphazardly arrayed. Some flowers are just beginning

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to reveal themselves; others are extravagantly pronounced, sweeping across the hill in bands, punctuated by coarse foliated rock formations and tall trees that have yet to display robust signs of spring.

Maybe one of the charms of azaleas is that, unless ruthlessly shaped into hedges, they really do appear to be wild, their flowers opening at varied times, reaching disparate heights, leaning in multiple directions, irregularly layered in waves — accidents of nature that just happen to be gathered here in immense profusion. While roses are generally seen in highly cultivated settings, and tulips are almost prim about their presentation, azaleas, which grow profusely along river banks and on hillsides, proudly display a heritage of untamed nature.

A great illusion, of course, particularly here. It doesn't take long to realize how far from the accidental is every aspect of this Azalea Garden, except, perhaps, that some of the older azalea plantings from the 1930s and '40s just happened to remain here, long after they had been overwhelmed by intrusions of other plants and the casual care once given this nondescript hillside.

But no haphazard planting could have led to such a calculated distribution of new low-lying plants that will, in time, create the living, flowering understory of this

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garden, plants whose very names — barrenwort and foam flower, Siberian bugloss and broad-leaved sedge — mix the exotic and the commonplace. And no random chance, in the midst of rocky outcrops and wet woodlands, could have inserted flowering dogwoods, magnolias and hydrangeas alongside 200-year-old remnants of the forest that once covered the Bronx.

The paths too, which are wide enough for the crowds who will doubtless come to see the peak blooms in coming weeks, artfully curve around rocks and plantings, offering inviting benches along the way. Almost unnoticeably the paths suggest contoured smaller gardens, defined not by hedgerows or borders, but by the character of the landscape: slopes of dappled shade, a rocky knoll, a moist, stream-fed woodland, each with its own plantings best suited to the setting.

As we are informed by one of the helpful signs, a meadow at the garden's highest point is inspired by "balds": "the grassy plant communities that inhabit certain mountain slopes and ridge tops in the southern Appalachians." Grasses and wildflowers, including blueberry plants with delicate tubular florets, and miniature "daffodil garlic" flowers that burst out of semitransparent, elongated pods, fill the ground-space between Japanese hybrid rhododendrons and azaleas, many yet to bloom.

And finally, of course, there are those azaleas — some 3,000 plants from all over the world — members of the genus *Rhododendron* that share this garden with their thick-leaved cousins that usually bear that name. Signs identify each plant's Latin name along with more informal varietal names; other signs offer explanations about important hybrids or plantings. This week, some azaleas were covered in a mist of freshly revealed petals; others, having already bloomed, had begun to shoot up their bright green new growth above their mass of leaves. Many more, still awaiting flowers, nearly concealed the



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Visitors at the New York Botanical Garden walk on a path above the Azalea Bank, which features a mix of hundreds of azaleas selected to flower in time for Mother's Day.

tear-drop-shaped buds that will, in coming weeks, unfold, revealing fragrant, fragile blossoms.

No, this garden is precisely the opposite of accidental. It is an exhibition that has been meticulously designed. There are 70,000 new plants, including 40,000 bulbs, 28,000 woodland perennials and ferns, and more than 3,500 trees and shrubs. The plantings alone cost \$1.5 million, and the garden as a whole \$5 million. It is one part of a \$150 million project that is reconceiving and reviving what is being called the "Heart of the Garden," including the adjacent old-growth forest and a pedagogical wetland trail. The new Azalea Garden is one of the institution's most ambitious recent projects and is so carefully planned that it reflects a particular philosophy of garden display.

There are larger assemblages of azaleas. The National Arboretum in Washington, for example, has 10,000 plants, which it was actually on the point of destroying because of budget problems until public outcry and a donation gave them a reprieve. But at the Botanical Garden the attempt has been made to be both rigorous and thorough, creating what its literature calls "one of the most important collections of the plant in the world."

Curators traveled to China and the republic of Georgia to get plants rarely found here. Famous hybrids created by individual growers are gathered together along with native plants; a wide range of "cultivars" — cultivated variations that might be propagated through cuttings or graft-

ing — is represented. There are also novelties like the patented "Encore" varieties that bloom in the fall as well as the spring. Signs also describe sweetgum growing by the brook, the appeal of the Grayblue Spicebush, and point out a 150-foot-high native tulip tree that is among the garden's oldest.

It's hard to imagine that any 11-acre plot could boast a comparable roster of caretakers, either. The azaleas and rhododendrons were planned by the Botanical Garden's own staff, notably Todd Forrest, Jessica Arcate Schuler and Deanna Curtis, assisted by Jim Gardiner, director of horticulture of the Royal Horticultural Society in London. The garden's concept is part of the larger-scale "Heart of the Garden" plan by Laurie Olin of the Olin Partnership. Also involved were the landscape architect Shavaun Towers of Towers/Golde who designed the pathways and overlooks. And the landscape architect Sheila Brady of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, with a curator at the Botanical Garden, Kristin M. Schleiter, designed the herbaceous companion plantings, applying an aesthetic that the firm refers to as the New American Garden Style.

Right now there is evidence of the garden's preadolescence in the spaces between plantings, the bare patches of ground, the room left for growth. But Gregory Long, the president of the Botanical Garden, points out in the brochure that it "embodies much that is central to this institution and its mission": beauty, conser-

vation, rigor, engagement with the public.

The other philosophy reflected here involved not just matching plants to particular micro-conditions, but also ensuring that the colors of the flowers would not jar or disrupt contemplation. In the midst of pale blossoms we don't get crimson outbursts or orange exclamations. That might have seemed provocative — perhaps even artificial. Nature here is wild, but proportioned, untamed but not disruptive.

More important, this was not to be a static garden whose main focus of attention would be a period of prime azalea blooming (which this year is so late, it may follow Mother's Day). Plantings were arranged so that during each month, from February through September, there might be a colorful array of flowers; planning maps were used to show probable distribution. And of course, over years, the plantings themselves would alter; ferns, grasses and hostas would cover the ground, the meadow would grow lush, the hillside more vibrant.

There are aspects too of what Oehme, van Sweden describes as the New American Garden: "It is vigorous and audacious, and vividly blends the natural and the cultivated." The designers' Web site describes a meadow that "reflects the year-round beauty of the natural landscape," something that seems to happen here, whether the flowers are in bloom or not. And the plants, rather than being carved into artificial shapes, seem to take a natural course "as they weave a tapestry across the entire garden plane." The results, they say, are "layered masses of foliage that boldly celebrate the ephemeral through mystery, intrigue and discovery."

I can imagine such a garden developing here over the years. Nothing could be more artificial, yet it will eventually seem to have almost casually evolved out of the natural landscape, presenting a microcosm of the world's azaleas and rhododendrons that just happened to display themselves for our pleasure, shifting character with season and age. This is a garden designed to display the suitability of plants to place, while demonstrating the inexorable passage of time — and that may be the most natural phenomenon of all.

The Azalea Garden opens Saturday at the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx River Parkway (Exit 7W) and Fordham Road, Bedford Park, the Bronx; nybg.org.