



Rescue and Revival

NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

1989–2018

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FOREWORD BY

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LIBRARY OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE HISTORY

AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS



Cedrus, from Christoph Jacob Trew, *Plantae Selectae* (1750–1773).

support of private donors such as Tom and Anne Hubbard as well as the Mellon Foundation and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Office of Education of the State of New York. About 50 percent of its annual operating costs are supported by income from restricted endowments, and long-term funding from the Mertz Charitable Trust is in place. The library has attracted this private and government support not only because it is one of the best science libraries in the country serving the academic community, but also because it is a public library—its research collections are available to people without academic credentials during many hours of the week. This is a long tradition at NYBG and one we are very proud of. About twenty-five years ago, when so many research materials in every discipline were beginning to be made available electronically, there was much talk about fears that libraries

with real books and real archival materials would somehow become irrelevant—students and teachers would be doing all their research online. At NYBG we have never found this to be the case. Our beautiful books are used not just by scientists but by artists, graphic designers, students of the book arts, humanities scholars, publishers, and collectors. And many of our most current materials, available through electronic subscriptions, are accessible to our users who would find them too expensive to purchase.

Under the inspired leadership of Susan Fraser, now librarian emerita, the Mertz Library has conducted vast digitization programs and dramatically expanded and enhanced its primary function through an exhibition program and the creation, with Mellon funding, of a new division, the Humanities Institute, to engage fellows and visiting scholars in seminars, lecture series, and workshops and foster interdisciplinary research and public discussion. For the new exhibition program we built a small, beautiful gallery adjacent to the central rotunda on the sixth floor, as we had called for in our first strategic plan. Over the years we have held exhibitions of our illustrated books—on birds and plants, trees, the history of glass-houses—and medieval manuscripts and herbals. We also began to exhibit manuscripts and books from other collections (for shows



LuEsther T. Mertz Library exhibition gallery, 2002. Photo © Robert Benson Photography.

ence, plant ecology, and organic vegetable gardening and five thousand city teachers would attend professional development courses at NYBG. These are two of the greatest contributions the Garden makes to its community. In addition, the Garden has free admission for New York City residents on Wednesdays. Our farmers market has been operating for many years on the free Wednesday. When I last saw the statistics, 40 percent of NYBG visitors were Bronx residents—the Garden is a valued community amenity.

Outside our gates, we operate an ambitious community gardening outreach program known as Bronx Green-Up. Initially established in 1988 to support volunteer efforts to clean up vacant lots and create vegetable and flower gardens, Bronx Green-Up runs workshops and training sessions throughout the borough, to help residents create community and school gardens and urban farms. Over the years, more than three hundred gardens and urban farms have been established through the program, which has become known worldwide for its impact on the lives of New Yorkers.

Yet another way the Garden relates closely to the community is in our fine relations with the elected officials who represent the Bronx at all levels of government—borough, city, state, and federal. We have always tried to maintain friendly and helpful relations with our elected officials, and for the most part, over my years as CEO, our local electives have loved the Garden and been grateful for all we do for their community.

In 2010 the Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded NYBG its highest honor, the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, in recognition of outstanding contributions to the community. At the award ceremony held at the White House, Michelle Obama read a stirring tribute to NYBG for our service to our community and, she even added, for our service to the international conservation movement. I was told to bring just one member of the board of the Garden with me, and so of course I asked Karen Washington, the active and influential leader of Bronx Green-Up, and a fine member of the board of trustees. We had a marvelous time wandering around the White House, being serenaded by the Marine Corps band, receiving our award from Mrs. Obama herself,



First Lady Michelle Obama with NYBG trustee Karen Washington and Gregory Long at the National Medal for Museum and Library Service award ceremony, 2010.

and having many photographs taken. In one group photo, Karen, who is all charm, asked Mrs. Obama if she could put her arm around her in the photograph. Mrs. Obama, who is also all charm, laughed and said that would be wonderful. After the awards had been handed out by Mrs. Obama, a festive and luxurious lunch followed in the State Dining Room, for us, other awardees, and museum friends from across the country. It was a great moment for the New York Botanical Garden.

Meanwhile, as NYBG was being honored in Washington, as trustees were giving and raising endowment, and as our elected officials were helping us at City Hall, the fine professional staff we had assembled and nurtured were daily operating myriad programs and activities. In other words, while all the planning, strategic development, capital construction, new programs, and innovation were undertaken, the strong core of the institution was also flourishing. Our landscapes were beautifully maintained by our horticulturists, arborists,



View of the new Native Plant Garden. Photo © Marlon Co.

rary design is fresh and surprising, but it blends seamlessly into the historic fabric of the surrounding landscape.

Immediately across the river to the east of the forest is the Horticulture Operations Center. This behind-the-scenes complex, created to serve the needs of our sixty-plus gardeners and arborists, took many years to complete, largely because fundraising for such a functional project proved difficult in the extreme. There was some city money available, but the project required about \$10 million in private funding, and there were not many donors interested in the renovation and expansion of horticulture support facilities. It was necessary to do a gut rehab of an old headhouse to create new locker rooms, a lunchroom, safe pesticide storage, and other support facilities. In addition, there were several old greenhouses, many torn down, several restored, on the site. It was also necessary to create a massive new facility for the storage of compost and potting soil (some years, between eighty and ninety thousand plants are potted up at NYBG using potting soil we create), and we undertook the restoration of a series of charming pit houses for the propagation

and housing of thousands of plants. And we needed a structure for the Garden's scores of mowers, blowers, golf carts, and trucks used on a daily basis by the horticulture team. This complex of functional buildings surrounds two open spaces, one a parking lot for the staff who use this as their headquarters, and one a large quadrangle used as a nursery for trees and shrubs.

Also in the Heart of the Garden, on the eastern bank of the Bronx River adjacent to the forest, stands the Stone Mill, a National Historic Landmark and a New York City Landmark. Built by the Lorillard Tobacco Company from stone quarried on the site, the mill was used for grinding tobacco into snuff. The Lorillards had owned about a hundred acres along the river since the 1790s and had built several wooden mills, but replaced them around 1840 with this fine stone structure. The family and business moved away in 1870, and the land was acquired by New York City in 1884, which transferred it to NYBG in 1915. The mill was used as a storage facility by the city parks department or stood empty for several generations until it was rehabilitated by NYBG in the mid-twentieth century as a restaurant and entertaining facility. By the 1990s that earlier renovation needed total rethinking, and we undertook a complete



The restored Goldman Stone Mill. Photo © Robert Benson Photography.



Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life in the conservatory, 2015. Photo © Ben Hider Images.



The garden created by Raymond Jungles for *Brazilian Modern: The Living Art of Roberto Burle Marx*, 2019. Photo © Marlon Co.

all the written materials including signage and an exhibition catalog. In conjunction, there are poster exhibitions in the Mertz Library Rotunda and in the Ross Gallery; and lectures, symposia, and performing arts events. We also always develop a “poetry walk”—an outdoor display of poems related closely to the theme of the exhibition (a joint project for years with the poetry scholar Alice Quinn and the Poetry Society of America).

The process of developing ideas for exhibitions and devising a full program is not linear—it is highly creative, even intuitive, and ideas come in various ways, from staff, acquaintances, reading, travel experiences. All ideas must lend themselves to our multidimensional, multimedia format and are tested by our marketing department in e-surveys and focus groups. When an exhibition concept doesn’t pass muster in testing, we either recast it or we drop it. It customarily takes 24 to 36 months to plan and realize an exhibition, and as we feel the necessity to mount one every year, we are often working on three simultaneously. When an idea has proved market-worthy, we locate a subject-specialist curator, a scholar in the field, who can be retained as an independent contractor. For example, our research turned up the marvelous Adriana Zavala, an art historian from Tufts University specializing in twentieth-century women artists in Mexico, to create our Frida Kahlo show. The concept is developed, and we decide which art to borrow, relying on the credentials of the curator—otherwise why would museums in Mexico City lend 70 million dollars’ worth of Frida Kahlo’s art to a botanical garden in New York City? Simultaneously, the companion conservatory exhibition is designed, and in the fall of the year before the show is to open, we make the plant list, order the seeds, and begin to grow the plants. The catalog is written and the surrounding events are created. The exhibitions usually run three to five months, spring to fall. And while all of this is going on, our creative team must also mount an orchid exhibition with a different theme every year, a *kiku* display, and the annual *Holiday Train Show*.

Exhibitions combining horticulture, landscape, garden design, and the visual arts draw huge audiences. As a result of these exhibi-

tions, Garden attendance grew from approximately 700,000 in 2008 to 1.3 million in 2017. Pre-pandemic, we credited the special exhibition program with generating 30 to 40 percent of our annual revenue, grossing \$25 to \$30 million per year from ticket sales, group tours, parking charges, food service, retail, membership upgrades, and underwriting grants. Our special exhibitions have often received major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, who can see that they reach new humanities audiences—our venue is unique among American museums. In addition, our exhibitions have earned lavish praise from the media, including National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, and the *Financial Times* of London. They have been central in establishing our reputation as a world-famous place of intellectual excitement and beauty.

Sigourney Weaver came into the orbit of the New York Botanical Garden a decade ago when we invited her to be a special guest at our annual June Conservatory Ball, our principal social event of the year. Sigourney is a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker. She was born in New York City and has lived most of her life on Long Island and in Manhattan. Hollywood royalty she may be, but Sigourney loves New York. She is also known worldwide for her passionate environmental activism. Sigourney sat next to me at dinner that evening, and I regaled her with the glories of NYBG, especially our role in scientific research. I invited her for a golf cart tour of the Garden and all our facilities, and we spent the day together a few weeks later. Since that time, her connection to the Garden has deepened, and she joined the board of trustees in 2011.

Sigourney's contributions to the Garden have been profound. She has been the voice of NYBG, promoting our programs in the media, speaking at our events, hosting the PBS *Treasures of New York* series episode on NYBG, and lending her celebrity to boosting our reputation. And she gave us an especially memorable gift for our *Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of Hawai'i* exhibition. In 1939, O'Keeffe had sailed to Hawai'i to paint tropical plants. Most of those paintings are in the collections of the Honolulu Museum of Art and had



On a Garden tour, Larry Condon, Sigourney Weaver, Gregory Long, and NYBG friend Helen Mirren. Photo © Marlon Co.

not been seen in New York since before World War II, until our exhibition. But we managed to borrow the entire set (or all but one, that is) for a gallery show, and we created a lush Hawai'iian garden in the conservatory and made a ten-minute film in which Sigourney reads O'Keeffe's emotional letters to her estranged husband, Alfred Stieglitz, who was back in New York. In Sigourney's sonorous voice, the letters had an ineffable, dreamy quality, and hearing them was a memorable experience for hundreds of thousands of visitors to the exhibition.

In spite of her international travel schedule, Sigourney tries every year to see our major exhibitions, and she is usually at the Conservatory Ball. She has been a stalwart friend, and now many trustees know her and love seeing her when she's visiting, and many of our social friends know she will probably be at the next party. One year, when she was in Los Angeles in the middle of making a new *Avatar* film, she arranged with James Cameron to take a few days off to fly to New York to appear at the Conservatory Ball. The party was in my honor to mark my retirement, and, as it was during our *Georgia*