

Field Trip

City Splendor Fort Tryon Park, one of Manhattan's most beautiful, horticulturally ambitious spaces, fell into decay but has made a welcome and miraculous recovery **BY CAROL WILLIAMS**



In summer, *Deutzia* and *Persicaria polymorpha* bloom along the promenade. From the top, you can look south to the buildings of downtown Manhattan, west to the woody Palisades, and north to spectacular views of the Hudson River. The park has an astonishing eight miles of pathways, all of them worth exploring at any time of the year.

ON 67 CLIFFTOP ACRES at the northernmost end of Manhattan lies a treasure of American landscaping. Designed by the younger Frederick Law Olmsted, then alternately cultivated, neglected, and gloriously resurrected by the New York City Parks Department, Fort Tryon Park is free and open to the public 365 days a year. Take the A train.

The park's south entrance stands across from the 190th Street stop, New York's only Gothic Revival subway station. From the gate, paths and terraces lead the eye to astonishing tree-framed views of the Hudson River, 240 feet below, and the wild, forested cliffs of the opposite shore. A few feet away, the Heather Garden begins, undulating, apparently forever, up a gentle slope.

Olmsted's Heather Garden presents an extraordinary spectacle in a public park. A narrow footpath separates two long beds. In one, moorlike drifts of heaths and heathers—roughly 50 varieties of each—are elegantly interplanted with

scillas, species tulips, fritillaries, daphne, and franklinias. The heaths bloom from January to April, the heathers from June to September. The other bed flowers in spring and summer include lilies, peonies, iris, anemones, musk roses, and viburnums. Hummingbirds hover. Joggers linger.

Beside the Heather Garden a promenade climbs beneath American elms and culminates at the stone-walled Linden Terrace. From there you look out over wheeling hawks, the medieval tower of the Cloisters, and 20 miles of Hudson River. In summer, local residents spend entire days there in river breezes and green linden shade—"our air conditioner." Some eight miles

of stone pathways, stairs, promenades—blasted out of Manhattan schist—lead organically from terrace to terrace. Sheltered stone benches, nestled against cliffs, and hostas, magnolias, and witch hazels are small gardens in themselves, intimate and serene.

How so exquisite a landscape survived tells a story of the evolving attitude to public space in a great city. Fort Tryon was the scene of a bloody Revolutionary War battle; the British won and took Manhattan. In the late nineteenth century, several captains of industry, drawn to the charismatic terrain, created estates at the site.

In 1917, John D. Rockefeller II purchased the largest of these to serve as a future city park as well as the site of his Cloisters Museum. Initially, the city refused the gift: the difficulties of turning the site into a public park seemed insurmountable. Rockefeller persevered, choosing to give the city a completed park, with the caveat that the city must maintain it. In two bold moves, he bought the

view (the cliffs on the opposite shore, now New Jersey's Palisades Interstate Park) and retained Olmsted (son of the Central Park designer). Olmsted's plan works brilliantly, artfully separating pedestrian and vehicular circulation. Stone walls, arches, and parapets accentuate and blend with the site's natural contours. Thousands of plants were specified and planted.

Rockefeller handed over the park in 1935. As it happened, this gift of enlightened capitalism thrived under America's closest approach to socialism. The WPA trained scores of gardeners for city parks during the Depression, and Olmsted's plantings flourished. The park was hugely popular, especially with the many immigrant populations of upper Manhattan.

In the 1950s and '60s, the park began to decline along with the Parks Department's horticultural ambitions. As the city's fiscal fortunes fell in the 1970s, Fort Tryon was a victim. Invasive and unpruned trees obliterated views; flower beds and rock faces disappeared under ivy. As its beauty vanished, the park became dangerous.

It lacked the support of private conservancies such as those that arose to aid Central Park and Prospect Park, but it received support from the Greenacre Foundation in 1983, initiating recovery. The New York landscape firm Quennell Rothschild created a master restoration plan. After extensive research, the firm recommended keeping the key elements of the original design and planting plans. A fully restored Heather Garden would be the heart of the project.



The decision to restore a park from utter dereliction to the height of horticultural complexity might seem quixotic. There are four highly skilled full-time gardeners and two assistants. Arborists regularly prune the trees to maintain health and keep views open. Enthusiastic volunteers contribute labor. Greenacre continued to help, and in 2002 the Fort Tryon Trust was formed.

But most important, the City Parks Department stands firmly behind the flowering of the park. Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, who has spent his whole working life in the city's parks, speaks eloquently in favor of the redemptive value of beauty in public spaces. "I've never seen a fistfight in front of a flower bed," he says. Crime lessens; vandalism diminishes. Human beings are ennobled. Moreover, a beautiful park is a lodestone for neighborhood renewal.

All this is proven at Fort Tryon. Parks administrator Jane Schachat introduced yoga classes, mothers' groups, a dog run, and other activities designed to entice wary neighbors back into the park. An elegant restaurant, New Leaf Café, occupies the original stone concession building. Now the park is filled with people all day and at all seasons, and is itself a lure. Plans are afoot to replant Olmsted's original Alpine Garden, a rocky outcropping that descends the Broadway-facing slope of the park. A 700-foot Alpine Garden running down to a gritty New York avenue? Yes. nycgovparks.org.



Clockwise from top: On the path to the Pine Lawn, hostas and hellebore flourish beneath towering rock faces. ■ The Heather Garden is flush with dianthus, oriental poppies, salvia, nepeta, and grandiflora; the George Washington Bridge is visible through the trees. ■ Elsewhere in the Heather Garden, foxglove and coreopsis soften a rocky outcropping.

