

GARDENING FOR WELLBEING & WILDLIFE IN THE CITY

MARTHA ORBACH



NEW YORK:

BROOKLYN BOTANICAL GARDEN

9/11 MEMORIAL GARDEN

CLINTON COMMUNITY GARDEN

CENTRAL PARK

THE BATTERY

SNUG HARBOUR - CHINESE SCHOLAR'S GARDEN

91ST ST GARDEN

THE HIGHLINE

BOSTON:

FENWAY VICTORY GARDENS

EGLESTON COMMUNITY ORCHARD

THE EMERALD NECKLACE

ARNOLD ARBORETUM

INTRODUCTION

I have been a Garden Worker at Culpeper Community Garden for over 4 years. The garden is 33 years old and is one of the oldest community gardens in London. It's won many awards, and the most recent judge from London in Bloom wrote: "Culpeper is an outstanding example of community gardening in the city.... It's social and therapeutic horticulture at its best." The garden is made up of 52 small plots for local people who do not have a garden, 5 for local community groups, a communal lawn, pond, rose pergola, wildlife area, drought tolerant garden, acid bed, winter garden, resource centre and members tea hut. It's just under 1 acre but packs a lot in. Each week we have two open volunteer sessions and five supported sessions run in partnership with local organisations including The Elfrida Society (adults with learning difficulties) and Room to Heal (refugees and asylum seekers who've experienced torture). We provide workshops for schools, children's activities, arts projects, plant sales, talks, and an annual strawberry tea for 100 local pensioners.

We take members and volunteers to visit gardens including the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, Chelsea Physic Garden, St Mary's Secret Garden, Camley Street and Wakehurst Place. These trips are always a highlight – people find and share plants from their home countries, encounter new things (one of our volunteers with learning difficulties meeting a peacock for the first time was very joyful) and wonder at gardens which they have never encountered before. Aside from this I do not often have the opportunity to visit other gardens, especially not by myself, with time to explore my own interests, so the opportunity the Merlin Trust offered was very precious.



Volunteers from the Expert Patients Programme at Culpeper Community Garden



Children's summer arts project

LONDON: NEW YORK

New York and London are both dynamic, densely populated cities with little green space. Working at Culpeper and recently also on the garden at Mildmay Community Centre, I was curious to see how gardens and greenspaces functioned on the other side of the Atlantic. Culpeper Community Garden is twinned with Clinton Community Garden in Hells Kitchen, New York and this gave me the idea for this trip to explore gardening for wellbeing and wildlife in the city.

I went for 10 days from late October to early November and so the gardens were quiet and preparing for the winter. I kept checking before I left, as it arrives at slightly different times each year, but I was lucky enough to see Boston in the fall.

I landed in New York and travelled over the river to Bushwick, Brooklyn, where I'd rented a room. Caitlin and her boyfriend are gardeners so the first garden I visited was theirs. Their ground floor flat has little natural light but the opportunity to have a garden makes it worth it. As in London there are lots of people who do not have gardens and here, perhaps even more than London, people use public parks and gardens for birthday parties and get-togethers. That evening I had a brief explore of the local area and tried to re-adjust my sleep pattern. The automated train announcer on the L train subway sounded like a soul singer.



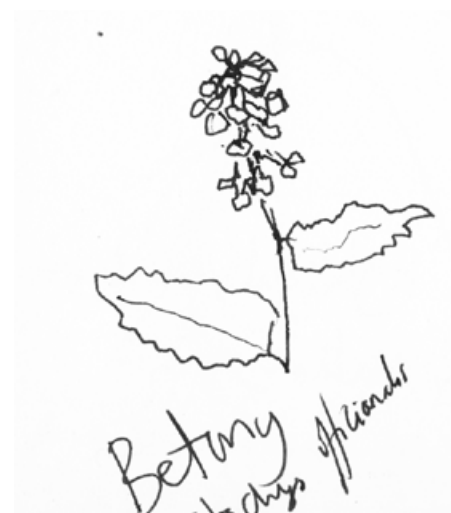
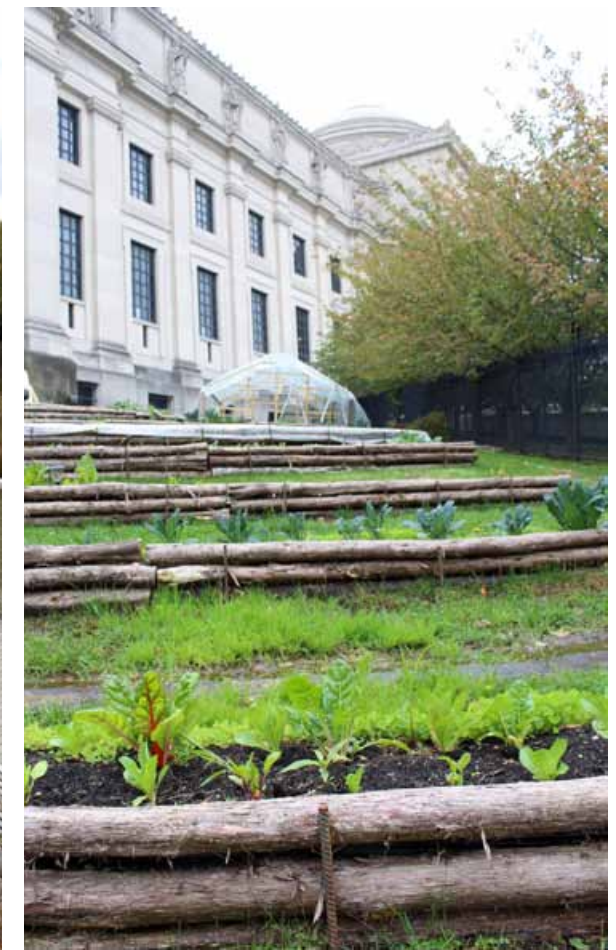
Caitlin and Jasper's Brooklyn Garden



BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDENS

I came out of the subway in Brooklyn and somewhat nervously asked a man who looked like he'd just finished work on a building site where the botanical gardens were. His face lit up and he said - "they are just over there! I'm a member, it's one of my favourite places."

As I approached the Brooklyn Museum I was curious to see a vegetable garden stretching down to the street from the momentous classical building. Project EATS is part of an art exhibition called Crossing Brooklyn which is about to open at the Museum.



NATIVE FLORA GARDEN

It was a grey day and the gardens were quiet – I'm intrigued by small blue birds flitting around Osbourne Gardens and find out they are American Blue Jays. I walk through chunky wisteria covered arches which run the length of the garden, down a few steps, and the Native Flora Garden is spread out before me.

This was one of the gardens I was most interested by. I have not visited many gardens internationally and it was fascinating to encounter this garden and see these plants combined into a natural landscape which was new to me and have them labelled so I could learn about the individual plants and species that it was comprised of. In the meadow, an extensive selection of grasses contrasted well with the fiery red leaves of Tupelo and Sumac, and it was interesting for me to see some of the East Coast natives that we have at Culpeper like Golden Rod and Asters in their native environment and get a better sense of wild USA.



Butterfly weed seed pods



CRANFORD ROSE GARDENS

From there I walked down to the Cranford Rose Gardens – which has one of the largest collections in the US. What captivated me immediately was that this formal garden also had a wild element. The extensive rose collection was under-planted with a wide variety of perennials such as Salvias and Nepeta which added a lovely selection of colours and textures to the garden. Later research showed me that this had come about through attempts to control rose rosette disease but that the perennials will remain “to provide habitat for the beneficial insects that reduce the need for chemical treatments in the garden. These companion plants also provide pleasing color combinations with the roses and cover bare spots in the beds where labor-intensive weeding would otherwise be needed.” This is certainly something that I am curious to try at Culpeper with our very modest rose area.

BONSAI MUSEUM

Unfortunately it was completely the wrong time of year for the huge Cherry Esplanade so I walked through quickly to the glass houses. Their bonsai collection was lovely and I was fascinated by the idea that “with maturity the bonsai comes slowly into harmony believing it’s a 30ft tall tree in the landscape.” This process of balance and adaptation has interesting possibilities with reference to working with people who have experienced trauma and may be something we look into doing with members at Room to Heal who have sought refuge or asylum and experienced torture.



Nepeta and roses

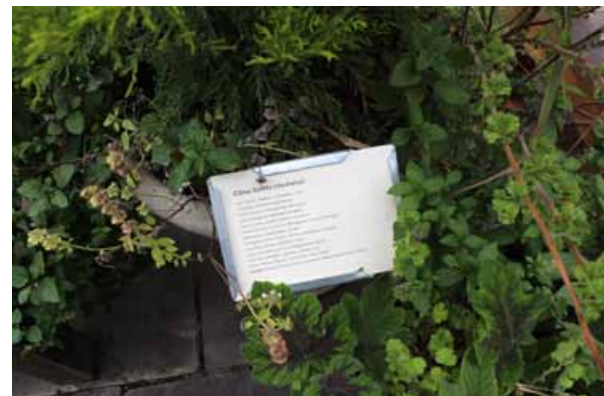


Black-eyed Susan



THE FRAGRANCE GARDEN

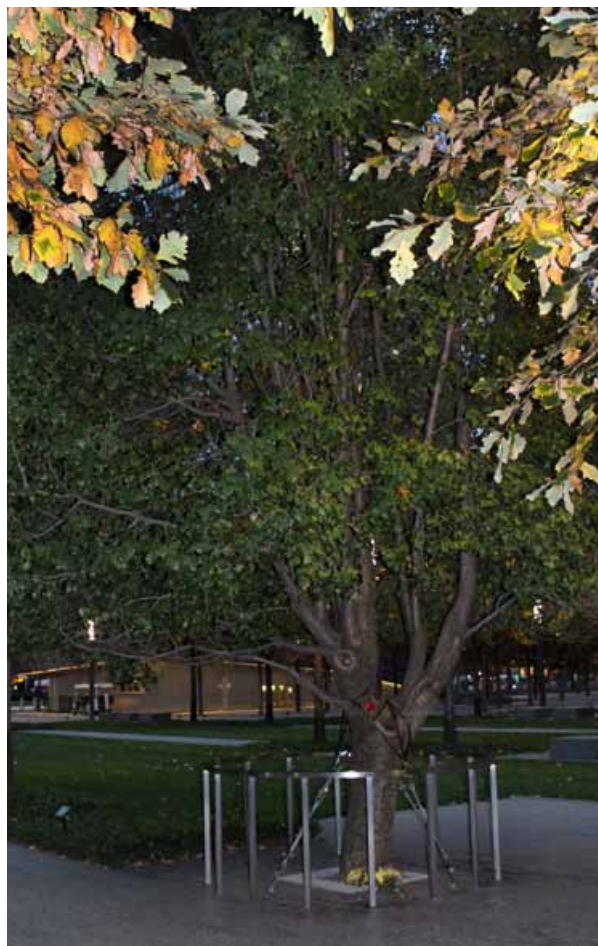
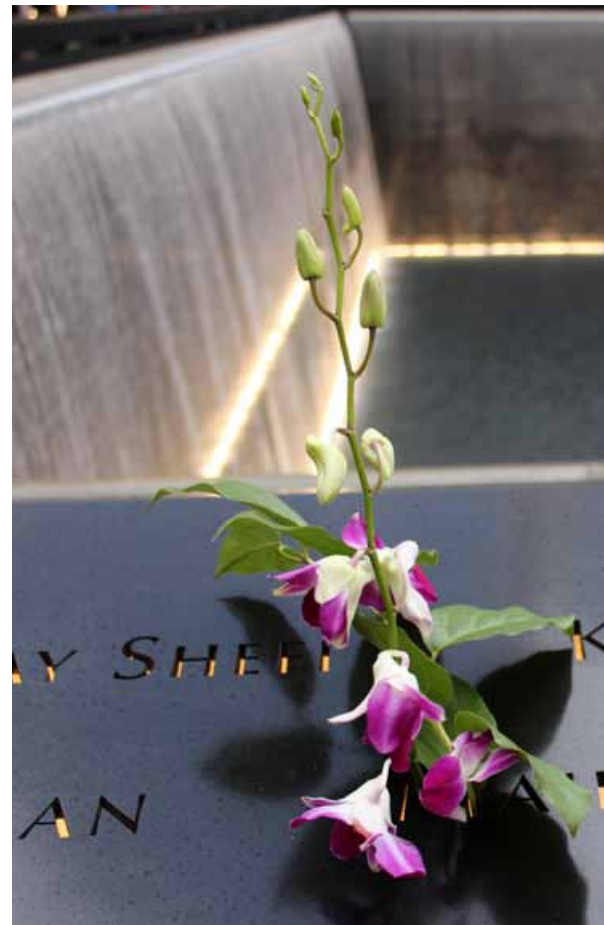
From there I found my way to the fragrance garden which is “the first garden in the country designed for the sight-impaired.” Bronze braille signs, raised borders, and sensory plant collections make this garden accessible as well as beautiful. Plant collections grouped by fragrance and flavour provide a lovely opportunities to engage with the gardens through touch and scent. These ideas would be useful both for our work with schools but also for visually impaired visitors to the garden. Using containers like this would also be practical as Culpeper is small and intensively used so we could vary them seasonally.



THE JAPANESE GARDEN

The bright red torii in the Japanese garden draws your eye instantly and walking around this garden was a great introduction to the concepts of the stroll-garden where the design guides you around a series of views and moments. This way of thinking about gardens will be useful at Culpeper which has circular pathways which maximise the feeling of space in a small area and there may be a few structural elements we could add to help define these moments for visitors. I was also interested to learn more about the importance of other elements such as bridges, shrines and fish in Japanese garden design.





9/11 MEMORIAL GARDEN

Someone suggested I went to see the new memorial garden at ground zero so I caught the subway across the river. The financial district was busy and imposing. The scale of the buildings, cranes and building sites obscures the light which makes your arrival at ground zero more dramatic as you can feel the preserved empty space. The planting at the plaza is still in progress – there are lines of swamp white oaks set into the paving through complex infrastructure which supports soil and drainage. The signage struck me as poignant in this context as this site is still quite fragile.

Finding the the survivor tree made me reflect on the symbolic use of nature in these environments and its use in such therapeutic contexts. We have done memorial planting at the garden and these metaphors are key in therapeutic horticulture. I have never encountered one before which has national significance and carries such explicit symbolic meaning, designated as a “living reminder of resilience, survival and rebirth.” proof that “America can survive and thrive.” It is conceptually beautiful but the tree has since been uprooted by a storm and so is now secured by steel cables which unfortunately also give the impression of a tree in chains which evokes the opposite of freedom. The tree and the gardens here highlighted a tension between the ever changing nature of plants and the natural environment and the need for memorials to be fixed and enduring. As I understand it the use of nature in this way incorporates an acceptance of change and a recognition of death as a naturally occurring phenomenon which in such a reified setting as this memorial plaza could be hard to incorporate. I imagine somewhere there are survivor tree cuttings growing to extend this survival story.

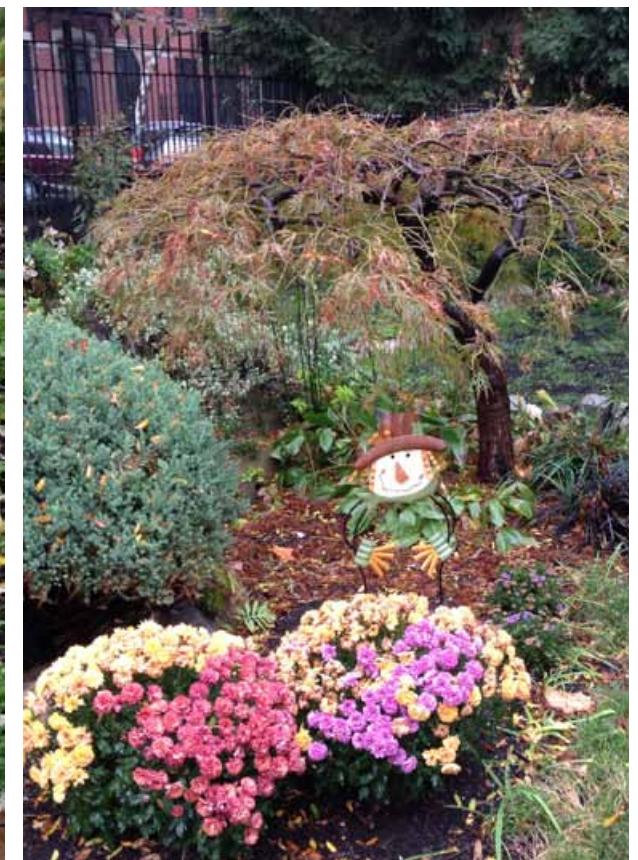
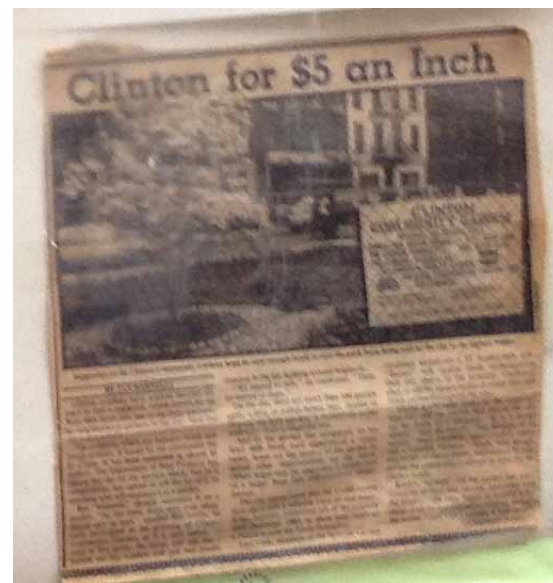
IRISH HUNGER MEMORIAL

I came upon this on my way to the ferry port. Incongruous in the financial district, it looks like you’re approaching a piece of rural Ireland in the middle of the city. Rambling dry stone walls surround small enclosures from where you can look back to the bright city lights. It worked for me as an experiential memorial as it does create a context which evokes a time and place very different to where you are. Also as the famine was so connected to the land and crop failure, this memorial is an evocative reminder of this in an environment which is now very removed from this.



CLINTON COMMUNITY GARDEN

This garden is perhaps the most similar to Culpeper Community Garden of all the ones I visited – a communal area with lawn and ornamental beds is backed by small plots tended by local people. As with all the community gardens I visited it was entirely managed by volunteers. Culpeper's evolution as a staffed community garden and the emphasis on working with disadvantaged groups seems rare. Like in London, lots of the community gardens here are looked after voluntarily by local residents and do not have the emphasis on social inclusion and charitable benefit. There's a nice range of plot styles and gardens as gardeners add individual touches.



CENTRAL PARK

I have to admit, I'd never heard of Frederick Law Olmsted until I arrived in New York. I knew I would go to central park – American's first public park and at 843 acres it's an urban greenspace of a magnitude I found hard to imagine. On the outside it's square and set within the grid formation but within it that disappears and you can wander through winding paths as you cross the park. The thing that really struck me was the use Olmsted made of different levels within the park – rocky outcrops, dips and slopes provide a refreshing selection of views and outdoor environments.

This is not something I've seen so much in London greenspaces. Some research informed me it's connected with the picturesque style of landscape design, where “covered rocky, broken terrain with teeming shrubs and creepers, struck the viewer with a sense of nature's richness. The picturesque style played with light and shade to lend the landscape a sense of mystery.” Central park does not need to accentuate its scale but in small urban parks and gardens this seems an interesting way of increasing the sense of space and different spaces they can provide.



Sugar Maple



THE BATTERY: GARDENS OF REMEMBRANCE AND THE BOSQUE

This was the first garden designed by Piet Oudolf that I'd visited and I was impressed by how good the swathes of perennials looked in November and how resilient they seemed to be to the strong and icy wind that was whipping around the harbour.



SNUG HARBOUR CULTURAL CENTRE

To get here, you take the ferry to Staten Island and then catch a bus along the shore to Snug Harbour Cultural Centre. It was previously a sailors retirement home and the sleepy, peaceful atmosphere seemed a million miles from New York. It's an expansive place and it took me a while to find the Chinese Scholar's Garden. A friendly security guard showed me the way and told me about his time touring in a funk band and visiting the UK. The two security in the hut where I bought my ticket for the scholars garden seemed bored.

CHINESE SCHOLAR'S GARDEN



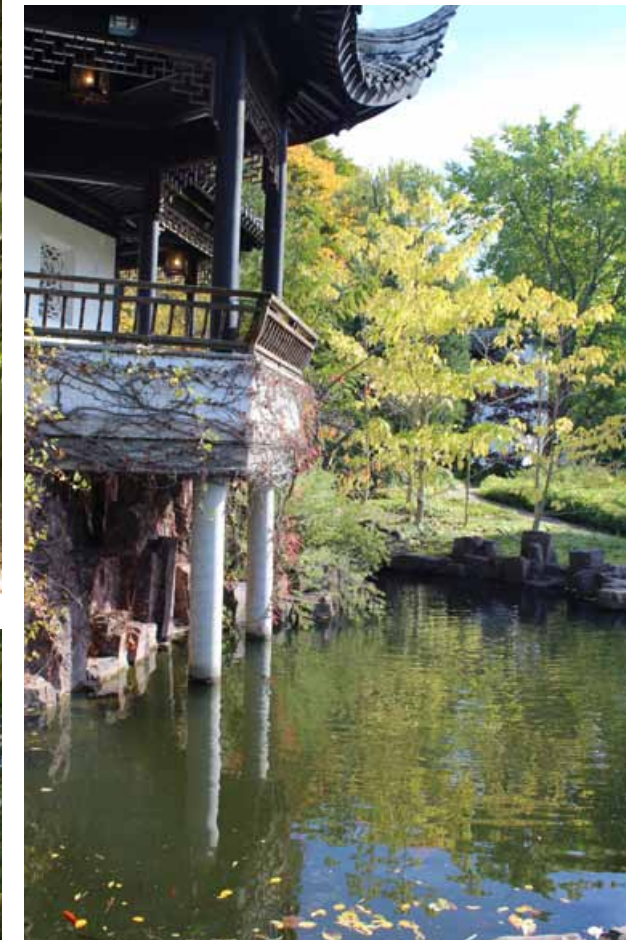
This garden introduced me to the 3 friends of winter: pine, bamboo and flowering plum (prunus mume)

“Because each plant and flower was also a symbol for special philosophical ideas – a flower arrangement was also a poem of sorts”

I was very inspired by the plants I encountered here and the concepts behind its design. I am looking in to sourcing prunus mume: Omoi-no-mama and some bamboo for the Mildmay Community garden to give the garden more interest and people more hope in the winter months.

“Central peak – this rockery, the central mountain of the garden is called Lingering in Clouds Peak. It's name evokes mystical places, and the scholars attempts through reclusion in the garden wilderness and attaining lofty heights”

The added symbolic layer to the design of the Chinese Scholar's Garden links in an interesting way with therapeutic horticulture which also employs the symbolism in plants and nature. I will use these ideas in the ongoing design for the Mildmay garden, working with members to create the symbolic as well as physical landscape at the garden.





SNUG HARBOUR

The scholar's garden is becoming neglected which adds a peaceful, faded aspect to its beauty. The Snug Harbour website admits that "climatic conditions and budget cuts have made maintenance a challenge." My visit was late in the season, but I had the garden to myself for the first half of my visit. Then a small but rushing wedding party arrived with big cameras and bright satin outfits and started taking their photos in the garden whilst arguing with security who had come to tell them that their limousine was double parked. They did not seem very interested in the gardens.

Visiting this garden made me think about the importance of an active community of people being involved with a garden. The cultural links which created this garden do not seem to have been sustained or developed. The garden is clearly under-resourced and does not have enough support from donors, local people, or the horticultural team, which is small and overstretched.

SNUG HARBOUR HERITAGE FARM

This was the most productive vegetable growing site that I saw. Rows of Cavalo Nero and mustard were still growing, alongside spinach beet and leeks. The farm was restored in 2011 and is now the largest urban educational farm in the city. In the 19th century Snug Harbour was self sufficient in fruit, vegetables, milk and eggs.



91ST STREET GARDEN

It was lovely and useful to meet Rosemary. She's Chair of the volunteer committee that looks after the garden and has been with the garden since 1987. Through talking to her I learnt that as in London, community gardens spring up in disused and unloved areas and then if they are lucky survive the regeneration which they help provide.

Similar to Culpeper, the 91st Street Garden is always open to the public. Set in the park overlooking the Hudson river, the garden is comprised of communal ornamental areas and plots for local people. Some of the aspects of how they run their garden that particularly interested me were that all volunteers are interviewed before they start to make sure they have relevant skills and experience. This is radically different to the way Culpeper operates where we undertake to find suitable tasks for whoever comes regardless of ability or aptitude. Something which seemed like a useful idea to borrow was that anyone who wants to have a garden there is expected to come on work days – either Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon. Sections(gardens) are given to people who've been coming to help for the longest time. There is no such requirement at Culpeper and implementing this sort of strategy would probably help to reduce the number of people who take on a garden and are full of enthusiasm but then disappear and never really commit to working on it.

They have similar plant theft issues as Culpeper – and similarly, when they put up signs asking people not to take plants these are also taken.

The surrounding park is looked after park conservatories with volunteers allocated different areas to manage – these sections of the park are required to look wild and people working here are not allowed to make gardens or plant things that might give the impression of a garden.



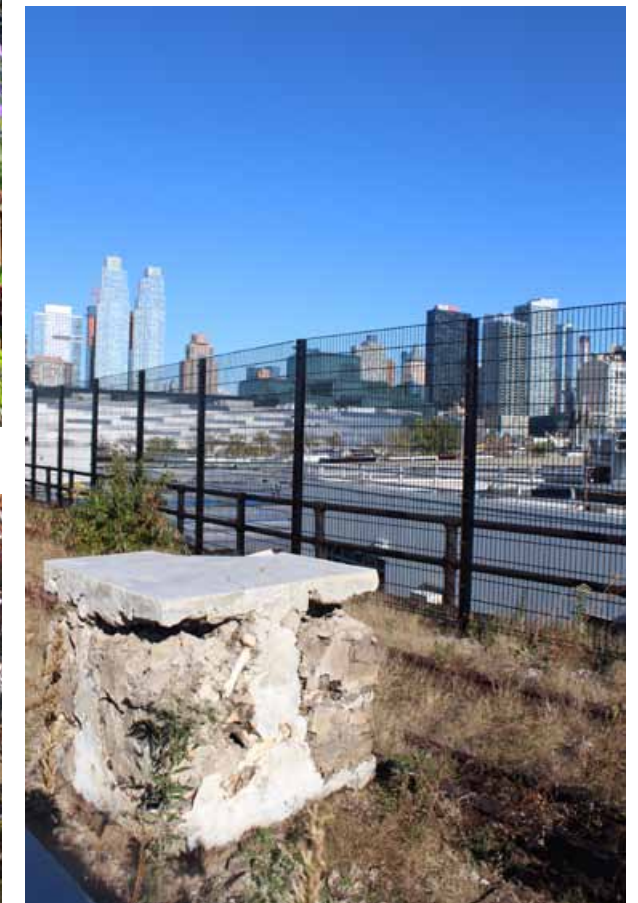
THE HIGHLINE

I walked the length of this in a bit of a hurry as I wasn't sure how long it would take and I didn't want to be late to meet one of the gardening team. It took about an hour, with stops for photographing and closer inspection but no loitering or stopping for coffee in the sun in the tempting looking deck chairs. It's an amazing project – the new sections where it's still quite wild and winds over the train depot and more industrial areas were my favourite. They are still quite sparsely planted and you get a lovely sense of adventure from the contrast between the industrial world below and this wild landscape winding through it. It made me imagine what it must've been like to explore before the garden was made.

It's a garden where the genius of the overall structure and conception dominates. The contrast between the garden landscape and the surrounding urban environment is a joy to see with numerous unexpected views where the gardens bridge building sites, main roads, overlook the docks. Landscape architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro have created a selection of spaces that are social, intimate, wild and cultivated and as you walk through it the ambition of the project is clearly apparent. The original train tracks are still visible and the planting is inspired by the self seeded landscape that sprung up along the highline. It's intended that the public can explore in "unscripted" ways but the paths are clearly demarcated making it generally clear that visitors are not invited to walk into the planted areas. It's wild in theme but not so much in practice.

Piet Oudolf's planting evokes this wildness and maintains the sense of walking through a landscape. This carefully curated impression is made up of over 300 plant species – "chosen for their hardiness, sustainability, and textural and color variation, with a focus on native species. Many of the species that originally grew on the High Line's rail bed are incorporated into the park's landscape. The design of the High Line's landscape also emphasizes a diversity in bloom time, with plants blooming from late January to mid-November." They have useful seasonal plant guides available on their website to help you find and appreciate the best of the season. This would be something I would love to be able to implement where I work. Even as simply as their plant of the day using social media and noticeboards as visitors do not often have the chance to make the link between the what they see and enjoy in the garden and the plant species and names.

Director of Horticulture Thomas Smarr offered to meet me and provided great suggestions for other gardens to see but unfortunately was ill on the day so Horticulture Manager Andi Pettis kindly stepped in to talk to me. It was a real privilege to get some insight into how such an iconic landscape project operates. Its social benefits are not particularly directed towards disadvantaged groups but it's open to all and provides an inspiring place to visit and spend time for everyone. They only take 1-2 regular volunteers per gardener which sound much more manageable than the lively, unruly volunteer teams we work with in community contexts. As the seasons are more dramatic, the end of winter and the start of spring is a more definite line and they have a big volunteer clean up day to cut back all perennials and this is often where they find their volunteers who will then stay for the season. One of the challenges of the site is that the soil is only 18 inches deep.



BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

This park has revitalised over a mile of Brooklyn's post-industrial waterfront and has stunning views of Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. The idea was conceived in 1985, the plan conceived in 2000, and construction began in 2008. It provides a range of ecosystems including meadows, salt marshes, and native woodland gardens.



STREET GARDENS

There is a lovely variety of gardens in the streets – around the base of a tree or maybe where one once was. They vary as you move through the different districts. A lot involved pumkins as New York was a whirl with Halloween.



Brooklyn



Upper West Side



Mid-town



Tribeca

NEW YORK: BOSTON

After 5 days in New York I took the train up to Boston. It was a lovely journey – enormous, comfortable seats and luminous autumn colours as the train made its way along the eastern coastline. I was staying in Brookline which is a million miles away from Brooklyn. Coloured painted wooden houses with big porches line wide streets and there's a large Jewish community so I explored bagels, books, and bought chocolate Hanukkah coins.

FENWAY VICTORY GARDENS

The Fenway Victory Gardens are the oldest continuously operating World War II Victory Gardens in the United States, spanning 7.5 acres with over 500 gardens. It was one of over 20 million victory gardens responsible for nearly half of all the vegetable produce during the war. It's entirely volunteer run. They have considered becoming a non-profit but the system is quite different here and they would aim to have a substantial endowment in place to support this.



Red Oak - Quercus Rubra



EGLESTON COMMUNITY ORCHARD

195 Boylston has a history common to urban lots. In 1884, a residence was built on the front half of the lot. After a fire, it has been vacant since 1984. The project “strengthens community resilience by engaging the diverse neighbors of Egleston Square through the practice of sustainable agriculture.” It’s a less affluent neighbourhood that is in the process of changing. There are new cafes an arts centre and another garden developing on a nearby vacant lot.



THE EMERALD NECKLACE

Another Olmsted park, I cycled along most of this – it's incomplete and criss-crossed by the occasional highway but still a lovely chain of parks to explore. The trees were all flaming shades of autumn and narrow paths opened out into large lakes. I returned the bike and bought something I wouldn't have recognised as coffee unless it had been labelled as such from Dunkin' Donuts and walked down to the Arboretum. This part of Boston has huge beautiful wooden houses, with two-story porches. Apparently underneath these is where the skunks like to live. Franklin Park, the final one in the necklace is in a much poorer neighborhood and is in much worse repair. There is an amazing bear enclosure which is completely derelict.



silver maple



THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM

This is beautiful – I have never been to such an amazing tree library before. Lots was new to me and I took the tourist route straight to the smoke bush trees and then on to the maples. There were many new things to enjoy along the route – Katsura trees, Sourwoods, and Soapberries. I stayed until my fingers froze. They have an interesting visitor centre with seasonal examples of what to see and famous types of wood and their uses such as hickory for drum sticks.



Maple selection

RETURN HOME

I am very grateful to have had this opportunity. Writing this report has been a good opportunity to re-visit it. There were so many things and experiences that I found interesting and inspiring. A wide range of these are relevant to my current work – we have begun work to improve the signage at Culpeper, and there is plenty more which will feed into the rest of my career. I am going to apply for further training to improve my plant knowledge and am interested in garden design.



Cotinus coggygria 'Daydream' smoke tree



Cotinus coggygria 'Daydream' smoke tree



Dawn Redwood



Katsura Tree



Enkianthus campanulatus



Finance report: Martha Orbach - Merlin 627

	Total	Air fare	Train fare	Other: travel to airport	Other: public transport US	Accomodation	Food	Visa: ESTA	Insurance	Other: Misc
Budgeted (£)		446	90	19	40	380	150	20	25	
Expenditure (£)										
Flight to NYC	468.24	468.24								
ESTA (visa waiver)	8.78							8.78		
Train to Boston	80.78		80.78							
Accomodation - NYC	235					235				
Insurance	17.91								17.91	
Travel to Heathrow	21			21						
Guidebook/map	14.99									14.99
Total £	846.70	468.24	80.78	21	0	235	0	8.78	17.91	14.99
Expenditure (\$)										
Subway - NYC	50				50					
Bike - Boston	24				24					
Metro - Boston	20				20					
Snug Harbour fee	6									6
Brooklyn Botanical fee	10									10
Food	117.74						117.74			
Train to airport	12.5				12.5					
Total \$	240.24				106.5		117.74			16
(converted to £)	154.20				68.36		75.56			10.27
GRAND TOTAL	1000.90	468.28	80.78	21	68.36	235	75.56	8.78	17.91	25.26



Grant award: £770

