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***UWSR Eco Letter
November/December 2025***

***COMMENTARY:
New York Restoration Project***

Since its founding in 1995, the New York Restoration Project (NYRP) has collaborated with residents in communities across the five boroughs to renovate gardens, grow food, restore parks, plant trees, protect our shorelines, and build partnerships that transform the city's landscape. NYRP stewards over 80 acres of parkland in Northern Manhattan and plants or distributes thousands of free trees annually. They also build, own and operate community gardens throughout all five boroughs.

NYRP is the only nonprofit citywide conservancy in New York City that brings private resources to spaces that lack adequate municipal support, with the goal of fortifying the city's aging infrastructure and creating a healthier environment for those who live in the most densely populated and the least green neighborhoods.

History

When famed entertainer Bette Midler returned to the city that helped launch her celebrated career, she found many of its streets, neighborhoods, and parks consumed by a sea of litter and the accumulated effects of years of neglect. Appalled at the state of open, green spaces, Bette recruited friends and family to remove garbage from parks in northern Manhattan. Then, on July 7, 1995, she founded the [New York Restoration Project](#), with the goal of revitalizing neglected neighborhood parks in economically disadvantaged New York City neighborhoods, including Sherman Creek Park, Highbridge Park, Fort Washington Park, and Fort Tryon Park in Upper Manhattan.

In May 1999, then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced plans to auction 114 community gardens for commercial development. Midler and NYRP's founding president, Joseph Pupello, led a coalition of greening organizations, including Trust for Public Land, and quickly rallied and raised the money needed to save these gardens. NYRP worked closely with the City of New York and took ownership of 52 of the most under-resourced gardens in the city's most economically challenged communities, ensuring that these spaces would

remain public gardens in perpetuity. In 2007, NYRP became the private partner of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's MillionTreesNYC campaign to plant one million new trees in New York City by 2015 (see more on this below under Tree Planting).

Parks and Community Gardens

NYRP currently owns and manages over 50 parks and community gardens throughout the City's five boroughs and works daily to promote the revitalized health of the neighborhoods these gardens serve. More than a thousand volunteers maintain these spaces by removing trash and composting organic matter.

If you're interested in volunteering, attending an online workshop, or joining a garden, [click here to find out how to get involved](#). You or your organization can also [host an event in an NYRP Garden](#) from April through October.

The 13 gardens NYRP currently stewards in Northern Manhattan (comprising more than 80 acres) are scattered throughout East Harlem, Harlem, Inwood, and Washington Heights, with the majority being in East Harlem. [Click here for a full list](#). Inwood's Sherman Creek Park, a former illegal dumping site, covers 15 beautifully reclaimed acres along the Harlem River including Swindler Cove, Riley-Levin Children's Garden, and a living shoreline installation (see below under Shoreline Protection). They also maintain the northern section of Highbridge Park, north of the George Washington Bridge, and between Highbridge, Sherman Creek, and the Harlem River Drive Greenway.

NYRP's gardens provide New Yorkers with room to grow fresh and nutritious food, exercise, spaces for children to play, and places to safely connect with friends and family. They have also served as [venues for environmental education](#) over the years, becoming outdoor classrooms and vibrant resources for many local schools. NYRP's educational programs also include online workshops, skill shares and technical consultations for urban growers and other community members.

Over the years, NYRP has deepened its work in the neighborhoods surrounding the community gardens they manage, and their staff has collaborated informally on greening projects with many likeminded local partners. In 2011, NYRP formalized this support network with the creation of its [Gardens for the City program](#), providing materials, horticultural knowledge, and labor to transform underutilized spaces into flourishing gardens. Since then, they've helped build over 300 gardens and shared green-spaces citywide. Their partners have included schools, community centers, assisted living facilities, houses of worship, GreenThumb gardens, New York City Housing Authority properties, and many more.

Tree Planting

MillionTreesNYC was formed in 2007 to revitalize New York City's urban tree canopy by planting and caring for one million new trees throughout the city. To accomplish this ambitious goal, NYRP joined forces with Mayor Bloomberg and the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation and became a co-leader. While the Department of Parks & Recreation and other municipal agencies planted along city streets, in parks, and on public rights of way, NYRP focused on two primary areas: providing free trees to New York City home or landowners; and directly planting trees alongside corporate and community volunteers in parks, school yards, public housing properties, and other public spaces.

MillionTreesNYC became a citywide movement that engaged and energized New Yorkers of every background. This historic effort was completed when the millionth tree was planted in October 2015 in the South Bronx. Today, NYRP continues to steward and care for thousands of trees planted during this time, and these now mature trees help keep city streets cooler, sequester carbon, and beautify neighborhoods. NYRP also continues to plant thousands of new trees each year as well as hosting free tree giveaway events. To date, they've distributed over 75,000 trees. You can [get more information on tree giveaways here](#).

1,000 Chestnut Challenge:

NYRP is partnering with longtime American Chestnut conservationist Bart Chezar, The American Chestnut Foundation and others to help distribute chestnut saplings, which have been hybridized with other species of chestnut, throughout the five boroughs. The American Chestnut, a prized source of food and timber, was one of the most abundant and productive trees in North America before the emergence of the chestnut blight, a fungal disease that kills the trees' inner bark, thus preventing the flow of nutrients and water to the leaves, flowers, and stems. Scientists estimate there were roughly four billion chestnut trees in the Eastern United States before the blight hit in the early twentieth century, making the tree a critical part of forest ecosystems. Despite its demise as a lumber and nut crop species, the American Chestnut is not extinct. The blight cannot kill the underground root system as the fungus is unable to compete with soil microorganisms. Stump sprouts grow vigorously in cutover or disturbed sites where there is plenty of sunlight, but these sprouts inevitably succumb to the blight.

NYRP's goal is to eventually establish 1,000 thriving hybrid American Chestnut trees throughout our local urban tree canopy. They have already planted more than 300 hybrid American Chestnut trees in Highbridge Park and are looking to partner with individuals and institutions to plant and monitor these seedlings as part of a long-term community science

experiment (the trees are free). Different seedlings have a range of resistance to the blight, and the monitoring data they collect will help identify resistant trees from which to collect seeds in the future. This data will also help inform larger restoration efforts lead by The American Chestnut Foundation. [Click here for more information about this project.](#)

Shoreline Protection

Sherman Creek Park is a cornerstone of the Inwood neighborhood that – like so much of New York City – is threatened by climate change-induced erosion and sea level rise. NYRP has been researching ways to protect it for years, and in 2020 they introduced an ecosystem-based solution called a living shoreline. Integrating native plantings and an artificial oyster reef (stacks of specialized concrete blocks called Oyster Castles), their living shoreline design aims to both attenuate waves that wash away sediment and enhance the native wetland habitat, one of the last of its kind in all of Manhattan.

The NYRP also partnered with the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service on their Coastal Zone Soil Survey (CZSS). The CZSS team and NYRP surveyed Manhattan’s largest remaining wetland, which runs along the Harlem River at Inwood’s Sherman Creek Park. This waterfront park is part of the last remaining salt marsh environment predating European colonization on the entire perimeter of Manhattan, and the resulting map of its underwater soils is the first of its kind ever charted in the borough. Salt marshes such as those in Sherman Creek Park sequester CO₂ at a rate ten times greater than mature tropical forests.

Additional information:

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