



Bronx Cheer

A northern gardener reflects on lessons learned in a world-class garden.

Text and photos by Eric Johnson

The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) in the Bronx borough of New York City is an inspiring and informative travel destination for the northern gardener. Although the garden teeters between USDA Zones 6 and 7—due partly to the heat of the city—much of what is grown works for zones 2 through 5. Like many botanical gardens, NYBG is full of ideas. A recent visit left me with 10 new gardening ideas to take home.

Contrast. Contrast. Contrast. Nothing breathes life into the garden or elevates digging in the dirt to an art form like contrast in texture and color. As long as your color palette

Annuals like 'Ka Bloom Splendor' gerbera daisy and *Zinnia* 'Majestic Color Orange' add pop.



doesn't jump completely across the color wheel—and that can work nicely for a splendid pop in a container of annuals—bold transitions from plant to plant make a border thrilling. The soft, powder blue, tongue-like leaves of lamb's ear at the base of the thread-like, blood-streaked spires of Japanese Blood Grass create a striking distinction—like fire and ice. When set-off with the magenta-toned annual Purple-leaved Cabbage Tree, the setting as a whole is a tiny patchwork of bold visual and textural interest. The waxy, grass-green lobed *Bergenia*, set against Japanese Blood Grass, transitioning to lipstick pink *Chelone* 'Hot Lips' (turtlehead) is striking but subtle enough to draw you in, rather than send you away.

Red is magic. Shades of red, especially dark red, add punch, boldness, weight, and richness. When spaced throughout the garden, red creates a pulse that draws the viewer through the space. But it needs to be darker than a pure geranium red. Although lovely in its place, bright red stops the eye. Darker red keeps it going. Consider *Angelica gigas*, *Sedum* 'Matrona', Japanese Blood Grass, *Berberis* 'Helmond Pillar' (the new columnar form), Diablo ninebark, and 'Bulls Blood' beet, which is treated as an ornamental throughout the NYBG.



Contrast creates interest: Soft lamb's ear and sharp Japanese Blood Grass.

Accent with grasses. Ornamental grasses can't be beat as an accent and focal point in a perennial border. Hardly a newcomer to the northern garden, ornamental grass works as the thriller at the center of a bed or the lush spiller at the edge, softening the transition from the soft edges to hardscape. Hardy and amazingly resistant to diseases and pests, including deer, grasses can be a solo act in the border. Consider placing a single clump of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus', 'Morning Light', or 'Graziella' at the back and slightly off-center in your perennial border. These varieties flaunt their soft-spraying form, rather than their seeds heads, and echo the look of a fountain of



new picture



Contrasts in color and texture in a mixed border.

water. The wheat-like *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' grass is known for its vertical interest and amber color that contrasts nicely with many plants. 'Elijah Blue' blue fescue and 'Little Bunny' dwarf fountain grass stand guard beautifully at the border's edge. An entire border of ornamental grasses is also a visual treat and appeals to those of us who grew up on the prairies of the Midwest.

Negative space is essential. Music is only noise without the silence. A pencil drawing without the paper showing through is simply a blackboard. Judicious use of negative space within the garden adds emphasis to the flora and creates a sense of order within the design. A fully packed border or bed excites the senses, but a smooth, roomy pathway or span of stone wall calms the soul. As compelling as the perennial plots at the NYBG are, the expansive lawns pull you in like your bed at the end of a long day. Many of us go through a plant collector phase of gardening when we stuff our landscapes with as many varieties as possible. Be open to the time when you will begin to edit and find solace in the negative spaces.

Make a seat. Gardening needs to be equal parts doing and looking. When you visit a great garden, where some-

one else does all the work, you are reminded that gardens are meant to be enjoyed—to be soaked in. Design seating and stopping areas into your garden. Then set aside time to actually use them. Gardening time isn't just the weeding, the deadheading, and the watering. It's also the meandering, the picking, and the perching.

Stake selectively. It's easy to write off the plants that limp out on you in the late summer. Ironically, it's the grand

dames of the garden that have trouble bearing the weight of their own greatness—Russian sage, yarrow, peonies, hydrangea, even some varieties of ornamental grasses. The NYBG stakes its garden royalty and because it's done sparingly, it's barely noticeable. Most of the stakings are simple—four to five bamboo sticks placed around the perimeter of the base and green garden twine encircling as low as possible. The mechanics fade into the horizon. As long as you are not staking everything,

An expanse of green gives the eye a chance to rest. Negative space is as important as color.





Plant *Juniperus* 'Blue Arrow' for vertical interest.



The Luce Herb Garden includes boxwood, *Salvia* 'Victoria', potted bay laurel, and pear trees.

the task is light and the effect is worth it, maintaining the vertical interest and the overall design of your garden.

Dine out. Yes, we have mosquitoes, but not every day of the year. Set up a space to eat near or in your garden and enjoy eating out whenever you can.

Annuals aren't average. They occasionally get a bad rap, but great new annuals are being introduced all the time, and they can't be beat for filling holes in the perennial garden. At the NYBG, a plot is dedicated to the cut-

ting garden where the annuals shine. It's tough to beat the color of a 'Ka Bloom Splendor' gerbera daisy paired with the ever-faithful *Zinnia* 'Majestic Color Orange'. With a background of marigold 'Antiqua Yellow', *Salvia* 'Victoria', and *Verbena bonariensis*, this quintet could create endless bouquets. NYBG treats tropical plants as annuals that highlight the perennial borders. Annuals are the throw pillows and rugs in your gardening living room.

Order in the garden. Even die-hard naturalists can't deny the peace and

pure beauty of a formal garden. The Luce Herb Garden at NYBG is a lovely division of trimmed boxwood, *Salvia* 'Victoria', potted bay laurel, and pear trees. It never strays far from cool greens and lavenders, and its smooth textures and sense of order prompts you to stand a bit straighter and stay a little longer.

Reconsider conifers. If you grew up with salt-ravaged junipers and balding pines, you may have sworn off anything with a needle. But the ornamental conifer forest at NYBG encourages

Highlights of the New York Botanical Garden

Irwin Perennial Garden

Designed as a series of meandering garden rooms, benches are scattered throughout to allow for closely and comfortably studying the collections.

Home Gardening Center

You'll learn something here, from how to create an artful vegetable garden to correct composting to ideas for gardening in dry shade.

Berenson Ornamental Conifer Collection

On a busy day at the garden, it was a peaceful, solitary walk. The collection shows you varieties suited to specific growing conditions, such as shade.

Rockefeller Rose Garden

A taste of old New York, the rose garden is grandly laid out, and, during this visit, it was accented by a stunning glass sculpture installation (*photo right*). —E.J.



Visiting the garden

NYBG is a 20 minute (about \$10 round-trip), easy train ride from Grand Central Station in New York City. Bargain flights to NYC and hotels can often be found online. General admission to the garden is \$6. Wednesdays are free. A Minnesota Landscape Arboretum membership will get you in free, as well. For more information, see www.nybg.org. —E.J.



Gardening shouldn't be all work. Plan for places to sit and enjoy.

a rethinking of that prejudice. Verging on garden sculpture, these jewels combine the best of a pine tree (the smell, the forest feel, the rich greens and golds) with the best of any desirable garden specimen (visual interest, pest and disease resistance, and year round appeal). The weeping and small forms are ideal for the heart of a border and the large forms are suited perfectly for the greater landscape. Take a look at 'Nidiformis' (dwarf bird nest spruce), which grows wider than it is tall and is hardy to 35° below zero. Weeping white spruce is one of the most toler-

ant spruces and can withstand heat, wind, cold, and overcrowding. Japanese Garden juniper is a spreader and a perfect groundcover. Its bluish-green foliage turns slightly purple in the winter. The relatively new introduction *Juniperus* 'Blue Arrow' is an improvement upon 'Skyrocket' providing unparalleled vertical interest when placed as a focal point. It evokes images of Tuscany when placed in a row. It grows to 12 feet and stays just 2 feet wide at the base. Your local nursery can help you find the right conifer for your landscape.

The next time you need to recharge your gardening battery, consider a trip to NYC. Gardens abound throughout the city, and they all have something to teach. [img](#)

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Below left: 'Little Bunny' dwarf fountain grass edges a border.

Below: Hardy weeping white spruce.

