

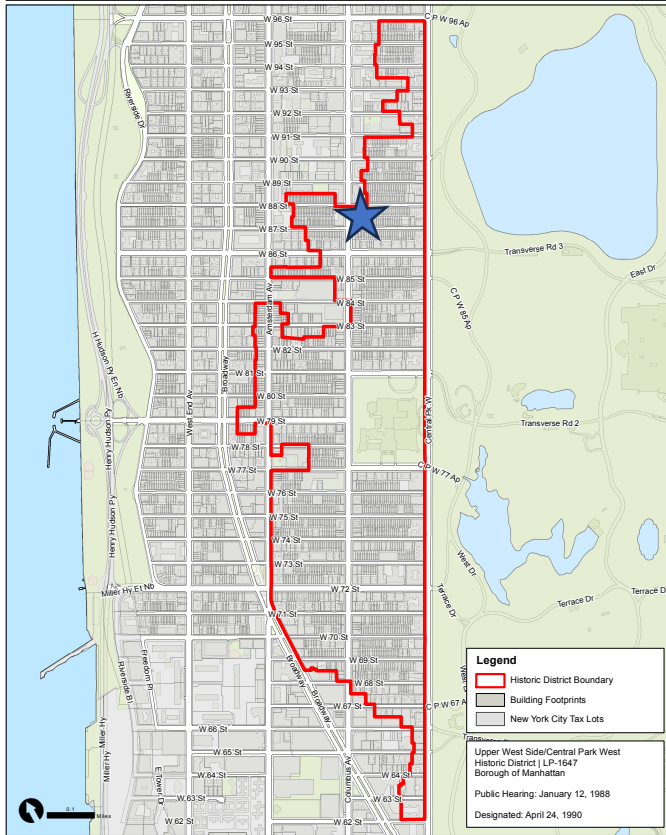
A History of West 87th Street Park & Garden
Compiled and edited by Greg Stevens and the Garden Committee
DRAFT October 2023 rev April 2025

FULL TEXT FOR WEBSITE: A History of the West 87th Street Park & Garden

A GreenThumb Garden in a Historic District

How does the garden fit within our historic district?

Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District | LP-1647



Map indicating the location of the West 87th Street Park & Garden within boundaries of the Upper West Side-Central Park West Historic District.

Image: NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

The West 87th Street Park & Garden site sits within the boundaries of the Central Park West Historic District, which was designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1973. This district was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, and later expanded in 1990 to establish the Upper West Side-Central Park West Historic District.

In 1978, the NYC Parks Department established the GreenThumb community gardens program in response to the city's financial crisis of the 1970s, which resulted in the abandonment of public and private land. The majority of GreenThumb gardens were derelict vacant lots renovated by volunteers.

The West 87th Street Park & Garden became a GreenThumb garden in the late 1990s. The Garden remains City-owned property and is one of many NYC Park's GreenThumb gardens managed by neighborhood residents, providing important green space, and improving air quality, biodiversity, and the well-being of residents.

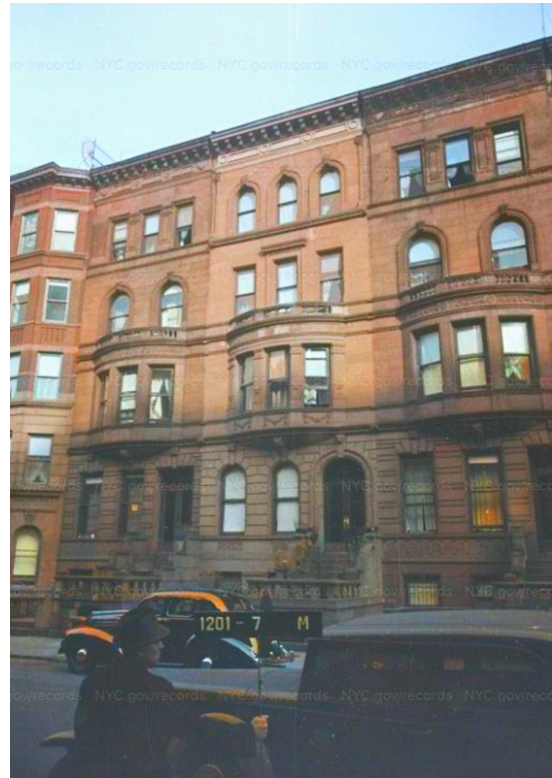
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1880s-1930s: From Ancestral Land to Building Boom

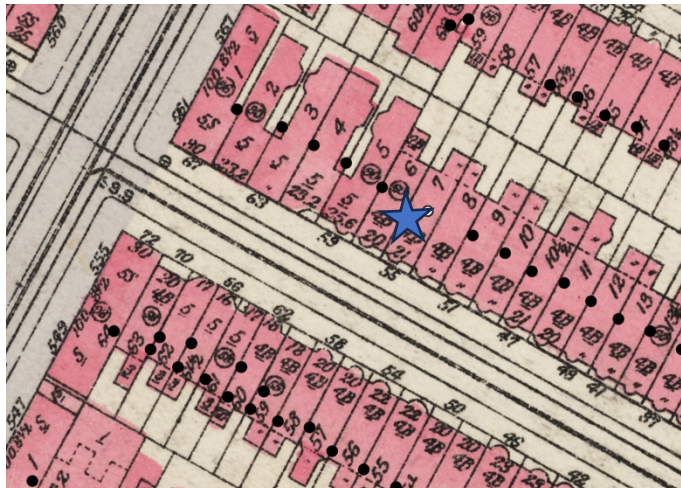
What was here before?

Two 1892 rowhouses once stood on the land now occupied by the Garden at 55-57 West 87th Street.

These rowhouses, designed by the architects Thom & Wilson, were built in this area during a boom between the 1880s and the 1930s, spurred in large part by civic and transportation advances that accelerated the commercial and residential development of this area: the completion of Central Park (1876), the opening of the 9th Ave. Elevated railway station at 86th and Columbus Ave. (then 9th Ave., 1879), the opening of the city's first subway line (1904), and the opening of the subway's 8th Ave. Line under Central Park West (1932). Speculatively-built single-family rowhouses, like the two homes at 55-57 West 87th Street, were designed within a relatively short span of years (1880-1910) and form the heart of the area. High stoops and the earth tones of brick and brownstone facades unify the rowhouses.



Top: A digitally-colored photograph of 57-55 West 87th Street (center, left to right), circa 1939-1941, site of the current Garden. Photograph taken by the Federal Works Progress Administration in collaboration with the New York City Tax Department.



Left: Map showing the block and lot numbers of 55-57 West 87th Street when the area was developed. Columbus Ave. is to the left.

Images: 1940s.NYC and NYC Department of Records and Information Services

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Before the boom, the Upper West Side was considered the “country,” a wilderness of rocks, farms, rural inns, and broken-down shanties. By 1868, the area had become decidedly lower class and was considered prime for development.



Top: The junction of Broadway and Eighth avenues in 1861. Lithograph by George Hayward for D.T. Valentine's Manual, 1862.

Image: The Museum of the City of New York

Bottom: Photograph of an area of the Upper West Side pre-1880s.

Image: Public domain

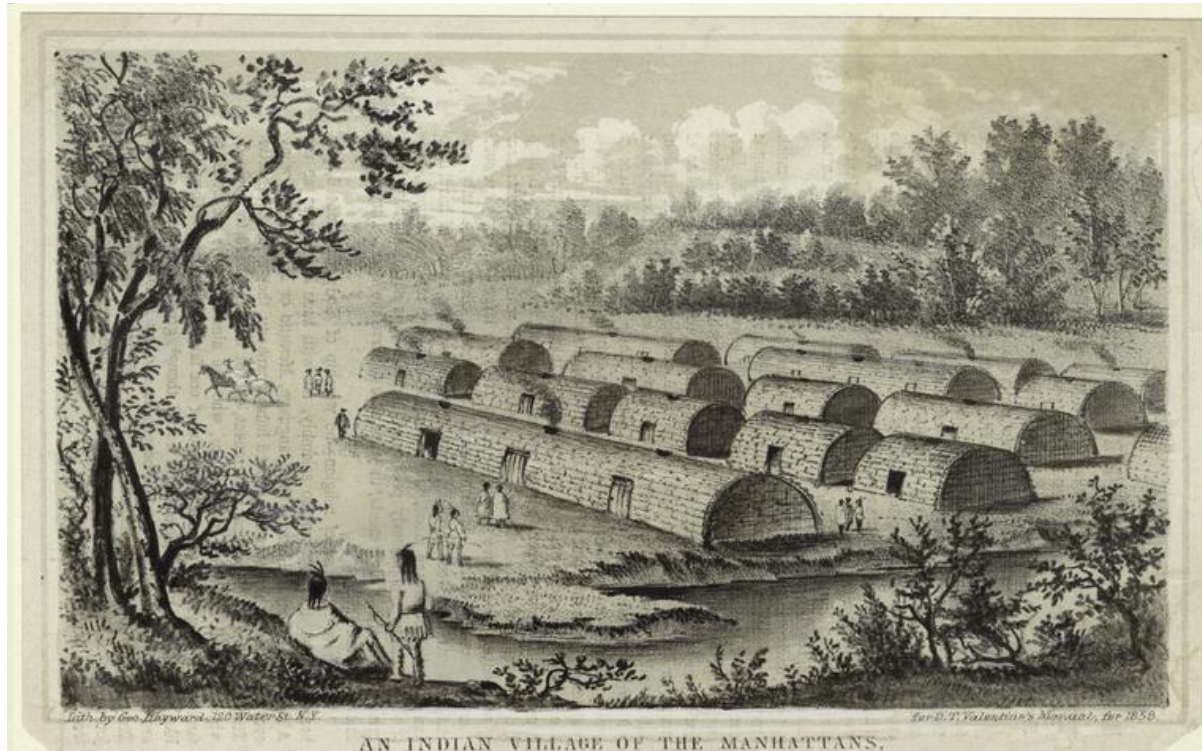


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Previously, this area was the ancestral land of the Lenape (len-AH-pay) people, who called this area Mannahatta (“Hilly Island”). Lenape families lived in bark-covered houses shaped like a dome, an opening on the roof to allow smoke from the cooking fire inside to escape. The Lenape of Mannahatta used a rich environment of natural resources for things they needed in their daily lives. We acknowledge the original homeland of the Lenape and honor the generations of stewards as we pay our respects to the many diverse Indigenous peoples still connected to this land.



Lithograph of a Lenape village prior to encounters with the Dutch in the 17th century.

Image: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.

The construction of rowhouses declined after 1895 when the cost of owning and maintaining a private home rose out of reach of the majority of New Yorkers. Economic realities caused later renovations before and after World War I and into the 1920s and 30s. Many rowhouses were converted to multi-family small apartment buildings in the mid-1920s, or were demolished for the construction of apartment buildings. With the onset of the Depression in 1929, construction in the district all but halted. Activity resumed slowly after the Depression. From the 1920s to the 1970s, but mostly after World War II, there were alterations of rowhouses (many of which had been subdivided into rooming houses earlier in the century) into the equivalent of small apartment buildings; these conversions were frequently associated with painting of brick facades or brownstone and the removal of stoops.

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1960s-1990s: From Urban Renewal to Neighborhood Yard (and Back)

What happened to the buildings that were here?

During the 1960s and 1970s portions of the Upper West Side were the focus of Federal and State urban renewal activity. In 1962 (plan amended in 1966), the area between West 87th and 97th Streets, Central Park West, and Amsterdam Avenue was also identified as a West Side Urban Renewal area. The two brownstones on this site were demolished in 1965 as part of the City's Upper West Side Urban Renewal program. The original plan was to remove the five buildings to the west, plus the building at the corner of Columbus and West 88th and replace them with something bigger. This plan was scrapped and for many years the vacant lot became a de facto yard for the mainly Puerto Rican and Dominican residents of the five buildings to the Garden's west. Adults gathered there in the summer evenings. Children played there and there were stickball/baseball games. Two Puerto Rican major league baseball players (and cousins) were graduates of that lot: relief pitcher Roberto Manuel Hernández Rodríguez, who went on to play for 10 different teams over 17 seasons, including the Mets; and infielder Alejandro Arias, who played for five teams over 10 seasons, including the Yankees. There were also basketball games at night, the sound of which resonated against the walls on either side and bothered some of the neighbors whose apartments overlooked the lot from the north and south.



The vacant lot with chain-link fence at 55-57 West 87th Street, site of the current Garden, circa 1980s.

Image: landmarkwest.org

By the 1980s, the site had come under the jurisdiction of the Highway Department. The complaints about noise from neighbors who wanted the site to be fenced off, and the feeling among residents of the buildings to the west that the space now occupied by the Garden was their yard led to a tense and angry public meeting at Goddard Riverside, convened by the Highway Department and presided over by the department's Acting Director of Community Involvement. The Acting Director indicated that without public agreement, a fence would be put up. Ultimately, there was no agreement and a fence went up, then later it was taken down again. Memories from neighbors differ about how long the original fence stayed up; some recollect that it lasted only a year or two, while others think it was several years.

Later, a second fence was erected for purposes of storing heavy machinery for a Columbus Ave. repaving and infrastructure project. The heavy machinery sparked a neighborhood protest against

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the noise, especially the loud backup beepers that sounded early every morning. When that project ended in the mid-1990s, the City dedicated the lot for use as a community garden, one of 13 City-owned lots. The construction company established the foundation of the garden by covering the lot with fill dirt on top of the modest layer of soil that already covered rubble from the demolished brownstones.

1997-Today: From Construction Machinery to Community Garden

How did it get to be a community garden?

In 1997, several committed neighbors, including longtime local residents Tom Yager and Amy Wagner and others, held a meeting at Goddard Riverside to discuss the future of the garden site. By all accounts, this meeting was decidedly more positive and hopeful than the tension-filled meeting of a decade before. Remembering the tension of the first meeting, Tom Yager came equipped with a constitution for the Garden designed to give voice to everyone and to provide a means of resolving disputes, by providing for annual meetings and an Administrative Committee. Copies of the proposed constitution were discussed section by section, with one change proposed--that money raised by the garden be spent only on the garden. With that change, participants voted to adopt what is now the Garden's Constitution.



A view of the West 87th Street Park & Garden from the entrance gates, circa 2021.

Image source: W 87th Street Park & Garden

In creating the Garden in 1997, Tom Yager and Amy Wagner posted a proposed plan on the chain-link fence, providing an opportunity for neighbors to offer feedback, which was largely positive. Amy played a major role in planning the layout of the Garden, making the soil usable, and planting numerous flowers, plants, shrubs, and trees, including a birch, two cherries, two maples, and a mulberry. The giant Empress Paulownia tree in the rear of the Garden appeared on its own. Tom laid the brick path that still exists. Together, Amy and Tom established the gravel paths that are refreshed seasonally, and selected and laid the flagstone, a project that took months and was recently redone by a professional funded by the Greenacre Foundation.

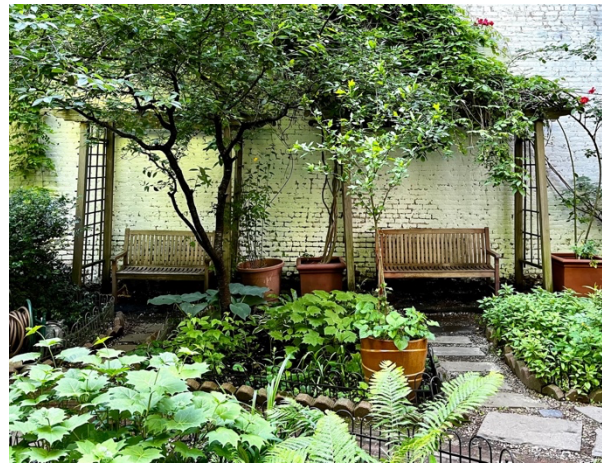
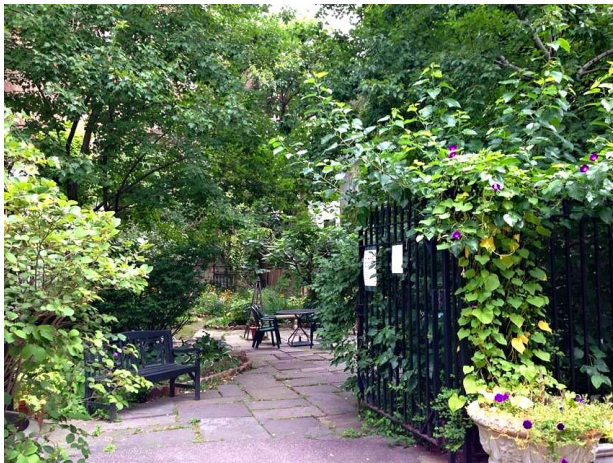
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Currently existing garden beds, paths, and children's play area were established early in the Garden's planning.

Image: Greg Stevens

The Greenacre Foundation later supported the fabrication and installation of the front fence and gates, the shed at the rear of the Garden, benches, and the lumber which Amy used to build the arbors on the west side of the Garden.



Left: Front gates to the Garden. Right: Arbors built by garden volunteer Amy Wagner. Both projects were supported by the Greenacre Foundation.

Images: Greg Stevens

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Before the Garden was officially founded, an idea had been proposed by residents of the adjacent buildings to have a playground on the whole lot. Many people attended a meeting to discuss the proposal. Tom Yager asked people to recount memories of their experience on that piece of land. Among other things, the baseball games and the major league players were mentioned. Then Tom proposed that the Garden create a new facility for children, which was approved.



The children's play area at the rear of the Garden, with garden shed at the left, 2023.

When the Garden was founded, it included a designated children's play area at the rear of the Garden. This area, restored in 2023, remains popular with families.

Image: Greg Stevens



Left to right: A Blue Jay enjoys a summer dip in the Garden; spring and summer flowers brighten up the verdant space.

Images: Christina Abossedgh

The Garden today is an ever-changing shade garden, with numerous annual and perennial flowers, plants, shrubs, and trees, as well as a variety of birds and pollinators. In late winter, trees are pruned and the Garden is prepared for April opening. In spring, annual flowers are planted, and Garden upkeep takes place through the summer. In fall,

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bulbs are planted, soil is composted, and the garden is put to bed for the winter. Several seating areas and paths throughout the Garden provide a place of rest, reflection, rejuvenation, study, socializing, and play. Arts, culture, and family events take place each spring, summer, and fall.



Left: A jazz combo, Ron McClure & Friends, perform each year in the Garden. Right: Volunteers set up for the Garden's annual Halloween event.

Images: Christina Abossedgh

The Garden is made possible by individual donations, support from the 6th New York City Council District Office, Greenacre Foundation, NYC Park's GreenThumb program, the NYC Department of Youth & Community Development, and a cadre of committed volunteers who collectively help maintain the Garden to be enjoyed each year by thousands of visitors of all ages and backgrounds.

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Volunteers helping in the Garden. Clockwise from top left, left to right: Amy Finley Scott and Amy Wagner; Caroline Bjorkman and Heather Parcels; Mary Reinke; students from Columbia University; Abdel Elanbassi and Jose Soler; Greg Stevens.

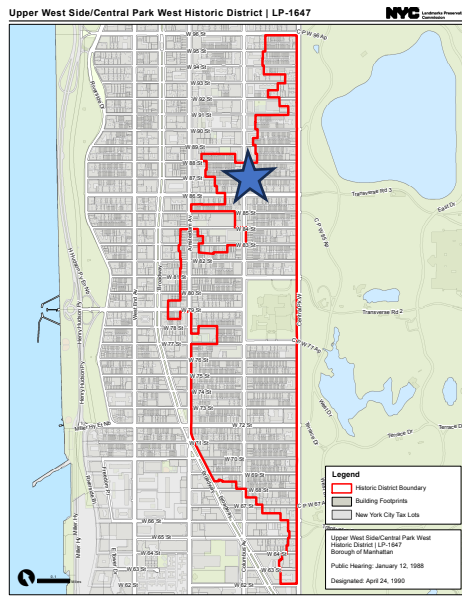
Images: Mary Reinke, Christina Abossedgh, Greg Stevens

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FOR SIGNBOARD: A Brief History of the Garden

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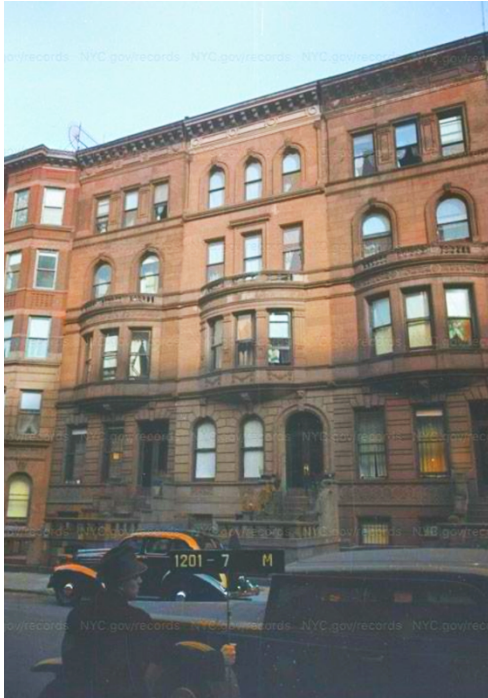
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A digitally-colored photograph of 57-55 West 87th Street (center, left to right), circa 1939-1941, site of the current Garden. Photograph taken by the Federal Works Progress Administration in collaboration with the New York City Tax Department.

Image: 1940s.NYC and NYC Department of Records and Information Services

Two 1892 brownstones once stood on the land now occupied by the West 87th Street Park & Garden.

These brownstones, designed by the architects Thom & Wilson, were built in this area during a boom between the 1880s and the 1930s, spurred by the completion of Central Park (1876), the opening of the 9th Ave. Elevated railway station at 86th and Columbus Ave. (then 9th Ave., 1879), the opening of the city's first subway line (1904), and the opening of the subway's 8th Ave. Line under Central Park West (1932).

Before the boom, this area was considered the "country." It consisted of farms, villages, and country residences for city dwellers. It became increasingly infilled with smaller, more suburban villas in the first half of the 19th century, and in the middle of the century, parts had become decidedly lower class, with a ragtag collection of squatters' housing, boarding houses, and rowdy taverns.

Previously, this area was the ancestral land of the Lenape (Lenapehoking) Indigenous people, who called it Mannahatta ("Hilly Island"). We acknowledge the original homeland of the Lenape and we pay our respects to the many diverse Indigenous peoples still connected to this land.

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Image: landmarkwest.org

The two brownstones were demolished in 1965 as part of construction on Columbus Ave. and the City's West Side Urban Renewal program.

The original plan was to remove the five buildings to the west, plus the building at the corner of Columbus and West 88th and replace them with something bigger. This plan was scrapped and the vacant lot became a de facto yard for the mainly Puerto Rican and Dominican residents of the five buildings to the Garden's west.

Adults gathered there in the summer evenings. Children played there and there were stickball, baseball, and basketball games. Two Puerto Rican major league baseball players (and cousins) were graduates of that lot: relief pitcher Roberto Manuel Hernández Rodríguez, who played for 10 teams including the Mets; and infielder Alejandro Arias, who played for five teams including the Yankees.

By the late 1980s, the lot was under the jurisdiction of the Highway Department, and a chain-link fence was put up. The site was later used for storing heavy machinery for a Columbus Ave. repaving and infrastructure project. When that project ended in the mid-1990s, the City dedicated the lot for use as a community garden.

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1997-Today: From Construction Machinery to Community Garden

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In 1997, committed neighbors held meetings to discuss the future of the garden site.

Representatives from the NYC Parks Department decided that the new garden would become a GreenThumb community garden. A Constitution for the Garden was established, and a planned layout was approved by the community, including garden beds, paths, seating areas, and children's play area. Later, a front fence, gardening shed, benches, and arbors were installed.



The Garden today is an ever-changing shade garden, with numerous annual and perennial flowers, plants, shrubs, and trees, as well as a variety of birds and pollinators.

In late winter, trees are pruned and the Garden is prepared for April opening. In spring, annual flowers are planted, and Garden upkeep takes place through the summer. In fall, bulbs are planted, soil is composted, and the garden is put to bed for the winter. Several seating areas and paths throughout the Garden provide a place of rest, reflection, rejuvenation, study, socializing, and play. Arts, culture, and family events take place across the year.



Top to bottom: A Blue Jay enjoys a summer dip in the Garden; volunteers help set up for the Garden's annual Halloween event; students from Columbia University helping ready the Garden for winter. Images: W 87th Street Park & Garden

The Garden is made possible by support from the 6th New York City Council District Office, Greenacre Foundation, NYC Park's GreenThumb program, NYC Department of Youth & Community Development, individual donations, and a cadre of committed volunteers who collectively help maintain the Garden to be enjoyed each year by thousands of visitors of all ages and backgrounds. Thank you.