

CHAPTER 15

Botany and Horticulture

Flowers always make people better, happier, and more helpful; they are sunshine, food, and medicine for the soul.

Luther Burbank

LIBRARY: BROOKLYN BOTANICAL GARDENS LIBRARY

Address: 1000 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY

URL: <http://www.bbg.org/research/library>

Telephone: (718) 623-7200

E-mail: library@bbg.org

Access: Open to the public

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/bklynbotanic>

I have been a patron of the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens since the early 1990s, but it was not until 2012 that I knew they had a library. We were at the Gardens for a weekend visit in the spring for the Cherry Blossom Festival and found the library by accident. With its semicircular interior ranges built around a rotunda, I thought it to be a perfect gem of a library. Marble statues of great scientists line the top floor, staring down at library users.



Public stack area of the library.

I met with librarian Kathy Crosby in the spring of 2015 to revisit the library and get a sense of where it is headed. She warned me in advance that the library is going through a restructuring of materials, so things might be messy. With my deadline looming, I decided to risk it. I arrived with a minimum of trouble and met with Ms. Crosby in her office, located around the corner from the book stacks.



The library is full of imaginative display pieces.

I soon learned that Brooklyn Botanical is in that fairly large group of libraries that have been operating for more than 100 years. They started in 1910 with a collection of four books. Despite the compact appearance of the library, that number has now grown to over 80,000. There are also more than 200,000 archival items, such as lantern slides, negatives, and institutional papers.



Current periodical display.

With all of these older items, it was a natural thing to ask about digitization, but so far they have done none of their own, although they do provide access to other online books. So far they have been using Library of Congress classification, but they may modify that in the future to make it work better for their own specialty. The books are indexed in a SydneyPLUS integrated library system, which I am told is a popular choice for special libraries. I tried searching the catalog for a subject that seemed surefire: the gardens at Monticello. I got 13 hits, and seven of them displayed color images of book covers, so the catalog looked efficient and appealing.

When asked about famous visitors, the name that came up right away was E.O. Wilson.

LIBRARY: THE BARBARA A. MARGOLIS LIBRARY OF THE HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

Address: 148 West 37th Street, New York, NY 10018

URL: https://thehort.org/education_library.html

Telephone: (212) 757-0915

E-mail: info@thehort.org

Access: Open to the public on weekdays

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/thehortnyc?fref=ts>

My only connection to horticulture is that I am married to a woman with a green thumb. Donna can make almost anything grow, although we hit a brick wall last year when we tried to plant zucchini in a spot that used to contain a tree before Hurricane Sandy. I, on the other hand, have a rock garden out back on a spot of land that would never grow grass.

I was scheduled to meet Sara Hobel, and I arrived early, so I had a chance to browse through the library for a few minutes. I noted that the books were overwhelmingly large pictorial volumes and that they were arranged in Library of Congress order. I soon found the rock garden section and found out something that I never knew—if I want to go to the absolute Mecca for Zen gardens, I must plan a visit to the Japanese city of Kyoto.

When Sara met me, I asked her which book in the library she considered to be the flagship holding, and I was told that they owned a copy of Philip Miller's seminal work, *The Dictionary of Gardening*. She told me that whatever the political differences between England and America, there was good synergy among the gardening enthusiasts, so lots of seeds and shoots made their way across the Atlantic in both directions. Another significant holding is a book about the naturalist John Bartram by Andrea Wulf. Unfortunately, there is no online catalog to make advance plans to see a book. On the other hand, this is a substantial library, so whatever your interest in horticulture, they are likely to have books about it.

The library is funded entirely by the parent organization. It was originally started as a pet project of one of the Frick daughters in the early twentieth century. The library is multipurpose, and the space is often used for programs, as it was on the day I visited.

Special collections include their Botanical Illustration Collection, popular with artists and others who appreciate finely produced books about plants. The American Landscape History Collection supports research on gardening in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The History of American Horticulture Collection contains practical books and magazines from 1850 to 1950. They also maintain an archive of institutional records.

LIBRARY: THE LUESTHER T. MERTZ LIBRARY, NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDENS

Address: 2900 Southern Blvd, Bronx, NY 10458

URL: <http://www.nybg.org/library/>

Telephone: (718) 817-8700

E-mail: libref@nybg.org

Access: Open to the public with Garden admission; circulation privileges for members

Transportation: Metro North Botanical Garden Station

There are two shining cultural institutions in the Bronx (three if you count the New York Yankees), and I will confess that in my time as a New Yorker I have made more trips to the New York Zoological Society (at one point I believe they gave up and just went back to calling it the Bronx Zoo because everyone else does). Across the Pelham Parkway is the New York Botanical Gardens. We went there in the early 1990s, and then about 10 years later for an unforgettable wedding. When it came time to write this book, the Botanical Gardens had a major advantage—it has a library that is demonstrably world class. When I contacted the library I was given an appointment with Stephen Sinon, Head of Archives.



The compact shelving room gives a hint of the enormity of this collection.

One thing that stands out immediately is that he is enormously proud of this library. I mentioned hearing that it was the largest such library in America. “Not so,” he said. “The largest in the world.” I learned that their book collection contains more than half a million volumes. One book hails from the late twelfth century—the earliest known copy of a ninth century book of Greco-Roman and Arabic plant knowledge. There are 14,000 journal titles, some going back to the seventeenth century.



The library allows some book circulation to garden members.

I always ask about which famous people have used the library. Sinon’s answer sounded like the opening of the Academy Awards—Sigourney Weaver, Daniel Day Lewis, and Helen Mirren. Authors Oliver Sacks and E.O. Wilson have used the library, as have members of the British royal family. Two television series have been filmed here in recent years. On the shelves opposite the reference desk I saw a picture of Michelle Obama and asked if she had been in. The answer was no, but she had invited them to the White House to collect an award.

The library keeps track of its holdings in an Innovative Interfaces catalog. The books are classified using a slightly modified Library of Congress scheme. While English is the predominant language, there are titles in 85 other tongues. Most books are reference, but there is a collection of 4000

circulating titles for Garden members. The library fields 3000 interlibrary loan requests every year.



Darwin presides over the Rare Books Room.

This library is one more addition to the 100-year club. It was opened to the public in 1900 and has been in continuous operation since. They do not provide e-books, but they have a selection of electronic journals for use in the library. There is an active digitization program for rare materials, and they partner with the Internet Archive, sending books to the Archive's satellite office in Princeton. They are also active in the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). I confessed that I had looked at the DPLA when it first came live and thought the content was thin. "Look again," I was told.

"This institution is not a passive thing. Real science has gone on here and continues to this day." Sinon told me that both puffed wheat and puffed rice were invented here. Also, seedless grapes were developed at the garden.

I asked where they send people to eat, and Sinon told me that there are two excellent restaurants on the premises. If people want to get away and have their own means, they are not far from a wonderful selection of restaurants on Arthur Avenue.

A month later, my mother-in-law was in from Arizona, and we needed someplace unique to take her. I joined the New York Botanical Gardens and we spent an excellent afternoon riding the trolley and reacquainting ourselves

with the Gardens. Afterward, we ate at the Garden's main restaurant and we can confirm that it is a very classy place to spend an afternoon.

FURTHER READING

Article about the Gardener's Dictionary: http://www.london.umb.edu/index.php/entry_detail/philip_millers_gardeners_dictionary/commerce/.

Channel Thirteen WNET tour of the New York Botanical Society Library with Stephen Sinon: <http://www.thirteen.org/program-content/the-new-york-botanical-garden-mertz-library-tour/>.

Digital Public Library of America: <http://dp.la/>.

E.O. Wilson page: <http://eowilsonfoundation.org/e-o-wilson/>.

Internet Archive: <http://archive.org>.

Miller's Dictionary of Gardening revised: https://books.google.com/books/about/Miller_s_dictionary_of_gardening_botany.html?id=5z4AAAAAQAAJ.

Monticello Gardens: <http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/historic-gardens>.